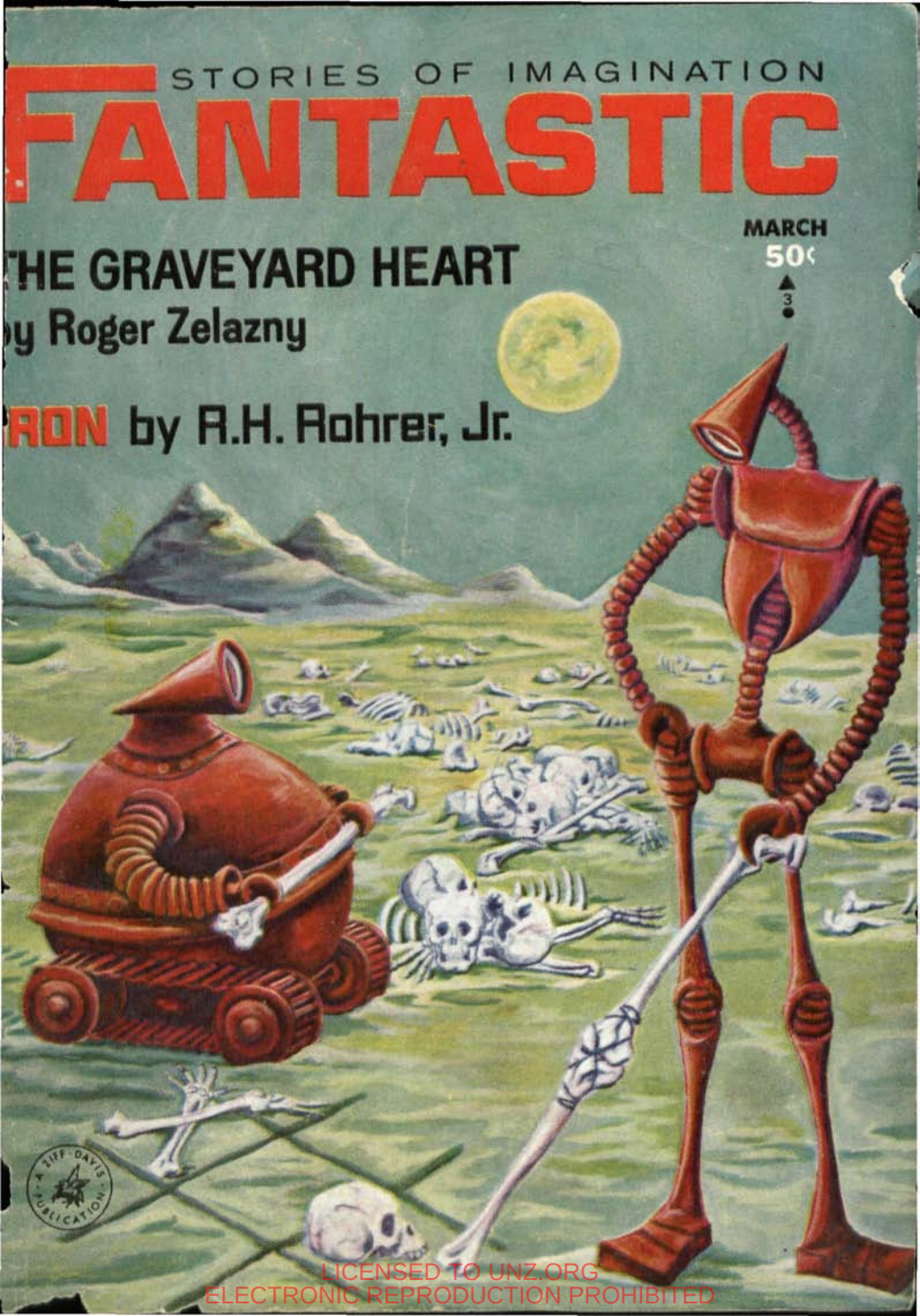

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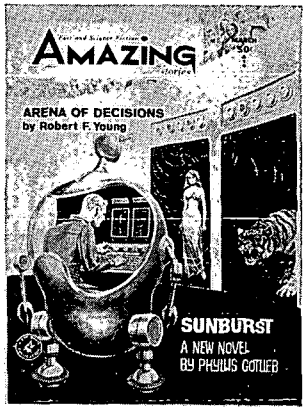

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FANTASTIC

MARCH 1964

Volume 13 Number 3

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF

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SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All subscription correspondence should be addressed to FANTASTIC, Circulation Department, 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Please allow at least six weeks for change of address. Include your old address, as well as new—enclosing if possible an address label from a recent issue.

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EDITORIAL

THE question of what a spiritual experience really is has puzzled man for, probably, as long as man has been capable of having spiritual experiences and puzzling about them. The many faiths—and anti-faiths—have their own hard-and-fast answers to the question. But increasingly, today, we are beginning to wonder if what we call a spiritual experience may be a new way of making contact with the energic forces of the universe.

A commentary on this was provided recently when Dr. Timothy F. Leary, an expert experimenter with the so-called "psychodelic drugs"—Psilocybin and LSD, which "expand consciousness" and produce hallucinations or illusions—said that they also can produce experiences of a spiritual nature which can make for "a changed man and a changed life." In other words, conversion.

Leary, who was dismissed some months ago from Harvard University when his drug experiments with students provoked controversy, said that nine of every ten persons taking the psychodelics reported intense religious experiences. "It is possible," he said recently, "that those aspects of the experience which the subjects report to be religious may involve a direct awareness of energy processes which physicists and chemists measure."

This, Leary added, poses for theologians the problem of reconciling drug-stimulated religious experiences with spiritual growth. "The next development in religion," Leary said, "may come not in the form of a new myth or a new ideology, but in the form of a new protein molecule."

* * *

Can wishing affect the weather? One way to tell is to check weather records and see if there are more sunny days on days when fair weather is desired—that is, weekends and holidays. In the last 50 years in St. Petersburg, Fla., there were 211 when the sun did not shine by mid-afternoon. But only 11 of these gloomy days were Sundays—the odds against such a statistic occurring by chance is 20,000 to 1.

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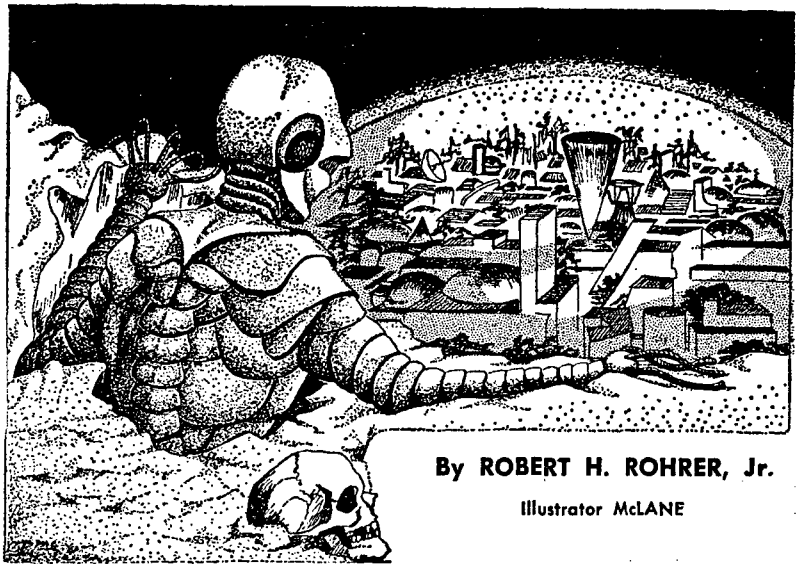

By ROBERT H. ROHRER, Jr.

Illustrator McLANE

It makes little difference what shapes the Life-Forms take. There are Street Cleaners who will keep things neat whether the debris be flesh, or . . .

IRON

FOR the first time in his 1000 years in the Mind Prison, Worz dared to form a thought. Immediately the magnesium Interceptors snapped into Negation position to disintegrate Worz's brain; but, as the prisoner had calculated a movement before his incarceration, the magnesium had weakened so over the centuries that the disintegration beam destroyed its own mechanism before Worz's protectively thick skull-case could be pierced. He collapsed against the base of his cylindrical cell and stretched his long, scaled limbs as luxuriously as the cramped quarters would permit. At last, he no longer had to strain against thought-formation! At last, he was free to escape!

Worz rubbed his wiry fingers hungrily over the steel walls of

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his cell. His iron-based metabolism had gone too long without satisfaction. His body's flexible patchwork shell of metal was soft, and he had begun decades before to sense a fuzziness in his mind. He had been unable to go through the process necessary for absorption of the metal that surrounded him because the Interceptors would have been triggered.

But now—food for the taking! Worz wondered briefly how much the enemy planet above him had changed during the years of his entombment; then he absorbed the Mind Prison into his body, dug through the thin layer of earth that had covered the cylinder, and stepped into the clear air.

HE stood with both feet planted firmly on the ground and turned his watery, black eyes skyward as his body expelled, through pores between his scales, impurities that had been in the metal. As he stood, a small animal similar in chemical composition to the creatures that Worz's people had been battling came hopping from behind a small clump of vegetation. Worz sensed the emanations from the animal's tiny brain, and he thought for the first time of trying to contact Xil, his mother planet. It was probably deserted by now; his fellow Xillians had been beaten back by the inhabitants of this green planet, had been cheated of the vital iron of which Xil had run dry. His comrades must have moved on in search of another world suitable for inhabitation.

But wherever they were, their minds would be ready for thought-reception. If Worz could rig up a makeshift transmitter, using the brain of one of the enemy creatures as a relay and his own inherent energy to create a wave, he might be able to contact a party of Xillians. As past experience had taught, the brain used would be burned out by only a few seconds' transmission; but that would be long enough for Worz to shoot off a coded message.

He paused for another moment, letting the newly absorbed power surge through his body; then he began to walk in the general direction of the city over which his ship had been downed. If the city was still there, it should contain millions of those Carbon-Water creatures. And one of them would serve Worz's purpose.

As he walked, he found himself going through mental exercises of sorts to restore the ability his mind had lost over the years. He thought of different things in rapid succession: his native planet; the war fleet's first attack on Earth—Earth, that was the name of this world—;

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the final onslaught, in which his own tiny fighter craft had been blown from under him; his military trial on Earth at the hands of the enemy creatures—Homo Sapiens was the name of the species, as Xillian spies had discovered—; and his imprisonment. The last thoughts, of his capture, were particularly painful to Worz, as emphasis on military prowess was high in his race. It would be humiliating to have to call to his comrades for help after so many hundreds of years of being trapped on this planet.

But it had to be done, thought Worz, and he quickened his step in the general direction of the city. In a short time he reached the summit of a wooded hill that overlooked a broad green valley. Worz was surprised to see a huge transparent dome standing below; it rose nearly to his eye level, and covered the tall spires of the city.

So, Homo Sapiens had erected a dome over his city, had he? Worz wondered why. The metropolis itself did not seem to have changed much at all; only the dome was new. Worz could see some sort of activity going on in the wire-thin streets that threaded between the buildings nearest him. Tiny black bits of dust moved back and forth along the roads. Worz began to descend toward the dome. He shouldn't have any trouble finding a suitable specimen in this teeming city.

WHEN he had reached the valley, he could see that a high metal band surrounded the base of the dome on the inside. It was probably only the foundation. But Worz thought it odd that he couldn't see a single ventilation chute along the entire stretch of dome visible to him. To keep such a large city supplied with oxygen, which was vital to Homo Sapiens, would require thousands of suction and purification units. He decided that they must stretch from under the dome to points several hundred feet away. That was the only sensible explanation.

He reached the foot of the dome. As he saw no gate or other means of entry nearby, he merely used some of his newly gained energy to enter the city. He concentrated his hands to white-heat and melted his way through the glass; then he simply absorbed a circular section of the metal band inside, which was not very thick.

He automatically dropped to his haunches and peered about warily when he had penetrated. He need not have bothered; he was in a side street, and there were only robot workers nearby, cleaning the streets as they pounded along on their metal flanges. Worz remembered the

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plan of the system of workers; they were controlled by a central machine, which was, in turn, managed by a group of "Creative Thinker" robots, which had the power to form opinions from data absorbed and to act accordingly. Homo Sapiens had been quite proud of his servants; Worz had learned English, and he had heard many of his captors brag about the robots.

No human beings walked this street. Worz decided to test the sensitivity of the street-cleaning robots. They were using vacuum pumps and baskets that had been attached to their barrel-sized bodies to collect trash—mostly iron filings and glass—from the nylon pavement, but their lean arms were tipped with razor-sharp claws that Worz did not like. He moved up behind one of the workers cautiously, walking silently on the balls of his feet.

He touched the street cleaner's back tentatively with one hand and received no reaction. He looked at the robot that was working the other side of the street, in perfect coordination with its partner. Neither machine gave any sign that it knew Worz was in existence. Worz grinned to himself. They were merely workers, nothing else. Because he felt he needed more energy after piercing the dome, he jumped onto the nearest robot's back and began to absorb. It took him a full ten minutes to take in all the metal and excrete the impurities.

After he was finished he moved toward the heart of the city, in search of Homo Sapiens.

ON his way to the Thought Center, Creative Thinker CT-5 paused before the Monument. He stood on his huge iron flanges and scanned the hundred-foot metal cone, his Analyzation Unit registering admiration and pride. On the square base of the cone was the simple inscription, THE CREATORS. CT-5 had always liked the simplicity of that inscription; it, and the whole project, had been CT-1's idea. The Monument was an ever-present reminder of the Forgotten Day, which no Creator in the city had survived.

CT-5 turned in the direction of the Thought Center again and allowed his Analyzation Unit, for the Nth time, to speculate about the Forgotten Day. The day had begun normally except for a warning of an approaching magnetic storm. CT-5 had been strolling about before the vast panel of the Central Transmitter, and then—nothing.

The next day all the Creators were gone. Worker activities went on as usual because the Central Transmitter had no orders to cover such a novel situation. CT-1 sent out several Law

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Enforcers to search for Creators in the woods outside the city; none were found. Some minor repairs were done on the Transmitter; it had probably been damaged in the storm. CT-5 had his Protective Censorship Unit replaced because it was nearly burned out as a result of what must have been almost continuous shielding of his Analyzation Coils from dangerous transmissions.

But he knew no other facts. The details of the Forgotten Day had been erased from the Transmitter's memory, so they had been erased from CT-5's.

CT-5 reached the front steps of the Thought Center. Two Law Enforcers stood on either side of the open doorway above; when CT-5 reached them they would block the doorway, and all three robots would be immobilized as the Central Transmitter identified CT-5 and gave the Law Enforcers the order to let the Creative Thinker enter. They would, of course, be given orders to demolish any worker who did not belong in the Thought Center.

CT-5 was about to mount the stairs when his locomotive power was cut off in the customary preparation for ingestion of a transmission. The two short clicks before the actual message told CT-5 that this was a Personal, direct from another Creative Thinker, and not a Blanket Transmission that would reach every worker in the city.

The words clicked into his Analyzation Unit, :CT-5 MULTIPLE ORDERS CODE 05703—REPORT TO DISPOSAL CENTER, INVESTIGATE TUBES, WIRING DELIVERED BY SC-763, ACT AS PER RESULTS GIVEN BY YOUR ANALYZER:

CT-5 rotated away from the Thought Center on the basal disk of one of his flanges and began to walk toward the Disposal Center, where all matter gathered from the streets by the Cleaners was collected and destroyed. Code 05703, was it? His Memory Circuits whispered. Code 05703 was "Violent Destruction of an Efficiently Functioning Worker." CT-5 had never had a Code 05703 before; the only workers destroyed in the city were those which malfunctioned. And the transmitter had given him the right to act on his own! That, too, was new. His Analyzers turned these facts over and decided that some additional information was needed for them to draw an accurate conclusion.

CT-5 lumbered through the portal of the Disposal Center. A DC worker was waiting just inside the building; the robot led him to the long, rectangular Table of Questionable Materials, which was set in the exact center of the vaulted main hall of the Disposal Center. CT-5 had not been ordered there to examine

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out-of-the-ordinary trash since the dome had been erected many centuries before as a protection against radiation.

AS the DC worker wandered away, CT-5 picked up the articles on the table one by one with his huge steel claws. He examined the tubes closely with the two light-sensitive spheres that stood out from his iron crown. Each tiny glass shell was stamped "SC-76" in minute letters and numerals. So, the owner of this paraphernalia had been a Street Cleaner in the 76th District. There were ten Cleaners assigned to each district of the city; CT-5 had only to find the third numeral and he would know exactly which worker had been destroyed. That secondary information was of no importance, his Analyzers clicked; he did not bother to signal the Central Transmitter.

CT-5 noticed that the metal contact prongs of the tubes had been neatly disintegrated but the tough plastic bases and glass shells had been left intact. Also, there was a huge pile of plastic-insulated wire lying on the table. This wiring had not been damaged, either. It could be used again.

A very efficient disintegrator of metal had destroyed the SC. CT-5's Memory Circuits told him that there were no metal-disintegrating machines in the city. Therefore a sentient alien being, probably of high intelligence, must have brought a weapon into the dome.

If the thing was alien, why hadn't the SC's rude but efficient Differentiator warned it when the creature had come within striking range? Differentiators had been installed in all workers so that they could distinguish between their own kind and Creators. CT-5 fed the question to his Analyzers.

After a moment the Analyzation United clicked, :Alien being a biped covered with metal: Of course; the Differentiators worked on the difference between iron and flesh. The attacker was two-legged, wore metal clothing, and was not a worker (:Disintegration by worker impossible: sneered the Analyzer unnecessarily). So, what was the thing?

Only a few seconds passed before CT-5's Memory Circuits came up with a description of the Xillians, who had been beaten off by the Creators in a bloody conflict centuries before.

Immediately CT-5's Analyzers snapped, :Must find Xillian, destroy: The Creative Thinker agreed. The desire to always protect and defend the Creators which had been stamped on his circuits took control, and he left the DC and headed toward the Thought Center.

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WORZ was baffled. He crept from one side of the Main Street to the other, glancing back and forth suspiciously as he did. He had already been forced to absorb the deadly claws of a robot marked "LE"—undoubtedly a member of some sort of police force. The claws of the robot had been around Worz's neck. A split second's delay, and Worz was sure he would have been decapitated.

But he could not find a single specimen of Homo Sapiens! He had covered half the area of the city, and not one human being was on the streets anywhere. Now Worz was in what seemed to be the central square of the town; there was a high metal cone in the middle of a huge, empty area of pavement that was surrounded by important-looking buildings. One structure Worz recognized as his first prison after being captured; another, as the courthouse in which he had been tried.

Where was the enemy? How was he to contact his fellows without a thought-battery? Worz shook himself; there was something chilling about the quiet whirring of arms and thumping of flanges that flowed into the square from the streets around and beyond it. He began, for the first time, to feel a certain dread; was this some monstrous trap? Had the inhabitants been warned of his approach somehow? He was about to move into the square, toward the high cone of metal, when an abnormally large robot appeared at the mouth of a street opposite Worz's. Worz flattened himself against the wall of the large building he was standing beside. The humanoid machine was heading directly toward him, although it could not possibly see him yet. Worz turned to run—and nearly crashed into the turned back of another "LE" robot several yards away. The machine was standing motionless, but if Worz ran in front of it he would surely be caught; he did not like the idea of another duel with a pair of razor-sharp claws, so he turned back to face the first robot. It was very close to him now; he saw that it had the figure "CT-5" blazoned in red across its metal forehead.

He moved out toward it, crouching beneath the range of its sight-spheres.

AS CT-5 neared the Thought Center, his Analyzers were in the process of feeding him the solution to the problem of detecting the Xillian. The answer was simple: CT-5 would merely have to have all Law Enforcers sensitized to the difference in shape between the feet of a worker and the feet of a Xillian, then take certain steps, and the creature would be easily captured.

Suddenly his subvisual warn-

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ings system sensed the approach of the lithe body of Worz. :Xillian: CT-5's Analyzers said. He pivoted on one rotating disk just as Worz tried to leap past him: CT-5 reached out with one metal claw, caught the iron man by the head, and lifted him high off the ground.

As CT-5 examined the Xillian with his light-sensitive spheres, there was a sudden, violent rise of temperature in the area of the Creative Thinker's outstretched claw and the alien dropped to the street. The claw had been disintegrated.

The Analyzation Unit offered shrewd advice. :Run: it clicked. CT-5 put his flanges into power drive and sped down the street, quickly outdistancing the Xillian. It was obvious now to CT-5 that some sort of protection was necessary against this monster. He set his Analyzation Unit to work on the problem, and in a matter of seconds his Selectors had chosen a solution. CT-5 headed for a Repair Center.

As he was having his disintegrated claw replaced and his protective shielding applied, he transmitted his instructions regarding *detection* of the Xillian to CT-1, via the Central Transmitter.

WORZ crouched in the shadow of an alley as two Street Cleaners pounded by, spraying a greenish dust over the yellow nylon pavement. He had to admit he was beaten. He had been down every street in the city and into many buildings, both public and private, but he had not seen a single human being. The master race had been cleaned from this metropolis—but how? Why? By whom?

The two worker robots disappeared around a corner. Worz jumped from his hiding place and began to walk down the street at a moderate pace, trying to imitate the lumbering gait of the machines. The alarm for him was probably out by now; he had remembered from his centuried pre-combat instructions what "CT" stood for. Perhaps he could fool the "LE" robots with a sham worker-like walk. He doubted that he would be able to absorb the claws of two or three metal figures before they had made short work of him.

Suddenly he remembered the cone that stood in the city square. If he could climb up the steep side by digging out handholds by absorption, and then burrow into the structure near the top, he would have not only an excellent hiding place but a massive food supply. The square might be seething with robots, but he had to take the chance. He broke into a stooped run.

The square was empty except for a few innocuous SC's that

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milled around spraying their green dust. Worz trotted to the base of the iron cone, measuring the height of the monolith mentally as he went. At least a hundred feet, he decided. If it was some sort of monument, as he suspected, the robots probably had a hands-off signal built into their circuits; they wouldn't touch the thing, let alone climb it. Worz would be perfectly safe.

He was stopped by the inscription on the square base. THE CREATORS, it read. That was all. Just THE CREATORS. Worz frowned to himself. Why would Homo Sapiens have erected such a monument?

He was about to scale the cone when he happened to look down and see something white sticking up through the nylon pavement. He stooped and looked more closely at the thing. It was short and stubby, obviously broken off at the end. It was a piece of bone.

Curious, Worz began to dig. First he tore up the pavement immediately in front of the monument, and then he dug through the dirt underneath with his spidery hands. The SC's that passed paid him no attention, merely scooping up the earth and bits of nylon that he threw over his shoulders.

Before long, Worz reached a metal obstruction. He hit it with a first. The obstruction was hollow. He absorbed a large hole in it and then clung to the ragged steel edges and looked into the vault below.

It was a vault; there was no other word for it. "Tomb" and "grave" were too personal to describe what Worz saw. It was a vault, and it was filled with graying, blackening bones and skulls that were still plastered with rusty brown hair. Almost all the skulls Worz could see were breached in some way; few of the individual bones were whole. A fracture here, a gaping hole there, told violent stories. Worz's eyes widened with sudden comprehension. *A fracture here made by an iron flange; a hole there smashed out by a wicked metal claw!*

WORZ sat back on his haunches and laughed soundlessly. So, Homo Sapiens had been wiped out by his own servant. And a metal servant, at that. The supreme irony.

What could have caused the workers to turn on their masters? Worz knew that the robots' circuits and units were saturated with the command never to harm a human being. He dug into his hazy memory of the robot system of the city and concentrated.

Something must have damaged that Central Transmitter, he decided finally. Perhaps an explosion—or, more likely, a freak storm, electrical in nature. He

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could picture the scene: a stray bolt of lightning arched down to the Thought Center and the listlessly wandering iron men suddenly jumped to life, whirled madly through the streets, crashed into buildings and slaughtered the men and women and children one by one. Blood dripped from every wall, spattered into every gutter.

And then what? Perhaps the Central Transmitter regained some of its machine-like sensibility; perhaps it realized that the workers' circuits would explode if comprehension of the terrible deed ever reached their wire-and-tubing minds. So it ordered them to dig a deep pit, and line the sides with metal, and throw the corpses in, and cover the top with a steel sheet. Then, in all probability, the Transmitter erased the events of the day from the memory circuits of all the workers and from its own mechanism, so that there would be no possibility of the robots' accidentally discovering the truth.

Worz reflected. Some of the human beings must have escaped. They would be in the hills now—rather, their descendants. He would merely have to search out a settlement, and then . . .

Worz jumped to his feet. Of course! Here was a way for him to save face when he contacted his comrades! If he could tell them in his coded message that he had rendered lifeless an entire city of robots constructed of *iron!*

His eyes cast about for the Thought Center. He had an idea, from his training and from what he had heard in prison, of how to feed a transmission into the Central Transmitter. All he had to do was inform the workers that they had killed their masters—"The Creators"—and every circuit, every tube would blow. Where was that building—ah, there it was.

Worz stiffened. Five "LE" robots were grinding toward him from the street by which he had entered the square.

For the first time he looked down and saw his tracks in the green dust the SC's had been spraying. He had thought the dust was a cleaning agent. It was not. The "LE's" had tracked him here.

Worz jumped to the side of the monument and began desperately to hollow out handholds. Too late. He was only three feet off the ground when a claw jerked him back and flung him head over heels to the street, into the path of the other four oncoming police robots.

Worz decided on a desperate gamble. He stepped his body up to its highest absorptive rate and dived into the flanges of the nearest running robot. As he had

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hoped, his body cut directly through the iron and the "LE" sprawled to the street, crashing into the legs of the robot that had snatched Worz from the cone. The second Law Enforcer tottered and smashed down on top of his companion.

Worz leaped to one side and the remaining three "LE's", unable to change their direction in the two short seconds between themselves and the two fallen machines, piled into the wreck with a loud BOOM! There was a crackle, the entire body of stacked "LE's" glowed blue for an instant, and all was still.

WORZ rose shakily from the ground. Close. Very close. He turned. A shadow fell across his vision.

He had to flatten completely to dodge the claw that CT-5 swung at him. He stepped up his absorption rate again and heaved against the Creative Thinker's flanges.

Nothing happened. Worz had collided with two solid pillars. As it bore home, Worz looked at the heavy flange that CT-5 was pressing down into his face.

The flange was wrapped around with plastic-insulated wire. CT-5's Analyzation Units had concluded that since none of the wire from the demolished Street Cleaner had been destroyed, the Xillian was unable to absorb plastic. The Analyzation Units had been right.

Fortunately, Worz's thick skull held for the split second he needed to channel all his energy into muscular power and heave CT-5 back on his flanges. CT-5's balance held, but Worz broke free and ran toward the Thought Center.

As the Xillian bounded up the stairs to the TC entrance, the two guard robots moved across the opening and blocked it with their arms. Worz did not hesitate in his headlong sprint; he remembered the identification ritual the guards went through with any robot that approached the portal.

As the robots' locomotive power was cut off for ingestion of the order to repulse the Xillian, Worz simply leaped over their shoulders, slicing off their heads with two outstretched, iron-absorbing arms as he jumped. He risked a second's glance back down the stairs. CT-5 was thundering after him with rapid sledge-hammer steps.

CT-5's multicellular units enabled him to do and think several different things at the same time. As he had attacked Worz, his vision spheres had taken in the exposed vault beneath the Monument and the rotting skeletons within. His Memory Circuits had identified the bones as human; his Analyzers had ab-

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sorbed this information and had come up with much the same conclusion that Worz had reached. CT-5's picture of the Forgotten Day was firmer than Worz's, because CT-5 knew of the magnetic storm that had been on its way that morning.

CT-5's circuits did not turn on themselves and explode because the Creative Thinker had not taken part in the massacre. His Protective Censorship Unit had blocked the Transmitter's faulty signals.

His Analyzers had also deduced Worz's purpose in entering the TC. They shouted, :Stop Xillian! Stop Xillian!: CT-5 caromed up the steps and smashed head-on through the arms of the defunct guard robots.

He saw the Xillian working frantically at the panel of the Central Transmitter. The creature knew what it was doing; it was pressing all the right buttons, utilizing the Feeder correctly and swiftly, reaching out to pull the lever that would make the message a Blanket Transmission—

:Stop Xillian!: screamed CT-5's Analyzers.

The Creative Thinker was only five feet from the panel when Worz pulled the Transmission Switch and CT-5's locomotion was cut off for ingestion.

CT-5's Protective Censorship Unit prevented the message from reaching his Analyzation Coils, but the common workers in the Thought Center had no Protective Censorship. Worz's transmission jabbed directly into their naked Analyzation Units.

WORZ looked with satisfaction at the motionless figures of the nearest workers as they ingested the Blanket Transmission. He was confident that a moment after the message had been pumped into them their circuits would burn out and they would fall in crumpled heaps. He could not possibly know that Analyzation Units were semi-protective in themselves.

The Creators had safeguarded their machines against blowouts; upon receiving any shock, the Analyzation coils would grind out as large a number of solutions other than explosion as possible, in a "path of least resistance" type of move. In this case the safest and most obvious solution was simply an internal return to the conditions of the Forgotten Day. Each worker reacted to Worz's message as it had to the freak Blanket Transmission caused by the magnetic storm.

When the workers began to whirl wildly about before him, clawing the air with their arms, Worz realized that his plan had been faulty in some way. He backed against the panel of the Central Transmitter as a number

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of violently gyrating machines formed a wide semicircle around him and began to close in, snapping their claws before them. They were after living humanoids, and Worz was very similar in shape and general aspect to the human Creators.

Worz's pig-eyes darted desperately about in search of a way out. He thought he saw an opening between two workers. He leaped for it. An iron arm caught him around his waist and pulled him into the center of the maddened robots. He struggled vainly against two machines which slowly pinned him to the floor with their razor-sharp claws.

Then, scale by scale and limb by limb, the workers in the Thought Center tore Worz apart.

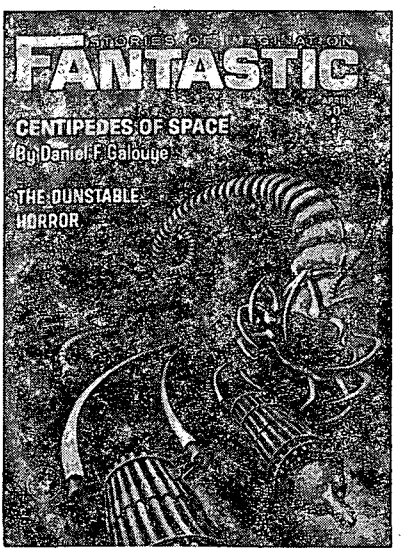
CT-5 was unaffected by the sight. He retired to his deactivation chamber and on the next morning, when the madness had died and the city was humming busily once again, he dispatched three extra Street Cleaners to the area in front of the panel of the Central Transmitter to clean up the shards of iron and flesh that were scattered there.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

If you think the old "invaders from space" gambit has seen its last inventive twist, be sure to get next month's issue of FANTASTIC, with **Daniel Galouye's** imaginative novelet, *Centipedes of Space*.

In the same issue will be a tale of quiet terror in the Lovecraft manner—*The Dunstable Horror;* other short stories, and all our regular features.



Be sure to get the April FANTASTIC, at your newsstand March 19.

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The Graveyard Heart

By ROGER ZELAZNY

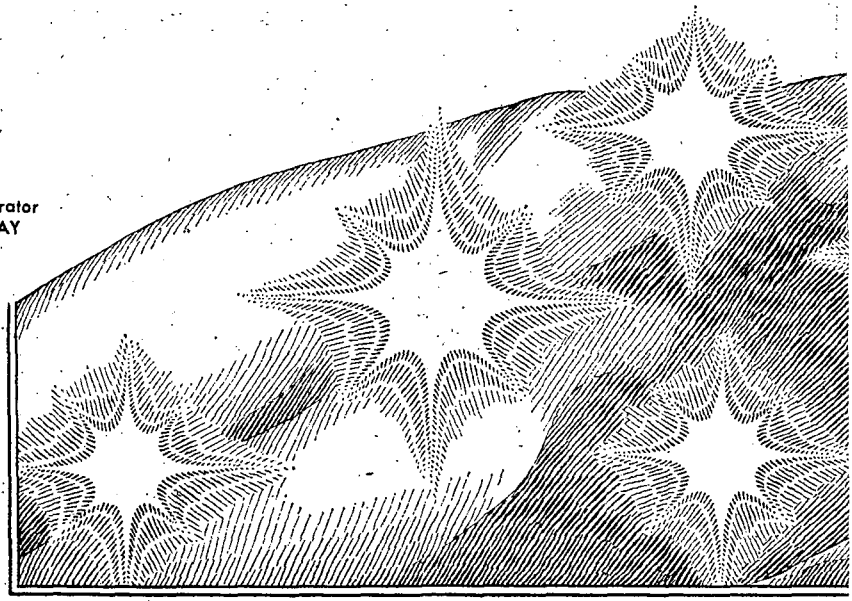
Moore sacrificed everything that had meaning for him in order to get into The Set. Then he did it all over again in an effort to get out. But neither sacrifice availed against the alien judgment day that waited . . . waited . . .

THEY were dancing,

—at the party of the century, the party of the millenium, and the Party of Parties,

—really, as well as calendar-wise,

—and he wanted to crush her, to tear her to pieces . . .



Illustrator FINLAY

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Moore did not really see the pavillion through which they moved, nor regard the hundred faceless shadows that glided about them. He did not take particular note of the swimming globes of colored light that followed above and behind them.

He felt these things, but he did not necessarily sniff wilderness in that ever-green relic of Christmas past turning on its bright pedestal in the center of the room —shedding its fireproofed needles and traditions these six days after the fact.

All of these were abstracted and dismissed, inhaled and filed away . . .

In a few more moments it would be Two Thousand.

Leota (nee Lilith) rested in the bow of his arm like a quivering arrow, until he wanted to break her or send her flying (he knew not where), to crush her into limpness, to make that samadhi, myopia, or whatever, go away from her graygreen eyes. At about that time, each time, she would lean against him and whisper something into his ear, something in French, a language he did not yet speak. She followed his inept lead so perfectly though, that it was not unwarranted that he should feel she could read his mind by pure kinesthesia.

Which made it all the worse then, whenever her breath collared his neck with a moist warmness that spread down under his jacket like an invisible infection. Then he would mutter "C'est vrai" or "Damn" or both, and try to crush her bridal whiteness and she would become an arrow once more. But she was dancing with him, which was a decided improvement over his last year/her yesterday.

It was almost Two Thousand.

Now . . .

The music broke itself apart and grew back together again as the globes blared daylight. Auld acquaintance, he was reminded, was not a thing to be trifled with.

He almost chuckled then, but the lights went out a moment later and he found himself occupied.

A voice speaking right beside him, beside everyone, stated:

"It is now Two Thousand. Happy New Year!"

HE crushed her.

No one cared about Times Square. The crowds in the Square had been watching a relay of the Party on a jerryscreen the size of a football field. Even now the onlookers were being amused by blacklight closeups of the couples on the dance floor. Perhaps at that very moment, Moore decided, they themselves were the subject of a hilarious sequence being served up before that overflowing Petri dish across the ocean. It

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was quite likely, considering his partner.

He did not care if they laughed at him, though. He had come too far to care.

"I love you," he said silently. (He used mental dittoes to presume an answer, and this made him feel somewhat happier.) Then the lights fireflied once more and auld acquaintance was remembered. A blizzard compounded of a hundred smashed rainbows began falling about the couples; slow-melting spirals of confetti drifted through the lights, dissolving as they descended upon the dancers; furry-edged projections of Chinese dragon kites swam overhead, grinning their way through the storm.

They resumed dancing and he asked her the same question he had asked her the year before.

"Can't we be alone, together, somewhere, just for a moment?"

She smothered a yawn.

"No, I'm bored. I'm going to leave in half an hour."

If voices can be throaty and rich, hers was an opulent neckful. Her throat *was* golden, to a well-sunned turn.

"Then let's spend it talking—in one of the little dining rooms."

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry. I *must* be seen for the next half hour."

Primitive Moore, who had spent most of his life dozing at the back of Civilized Moore's brain, rose to his haunches then, with a growl. Civilized Moore muzzled him though, because he did not wish to spoil things.

"When can I see you again?" he asked grimly.

"Perhaps Bastille Day," she whispered throatily. "There's the Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité Fête Nue . . ."

"Where?"

"In the New Versailles Dome, at nine. If you'd like an invitation I'll see that you receive one . . ."

"Yes, I do want one."

("She made you ask," jeered Primitive Moore.)

"Very well, you'll receive one in May."

"Won't you spare me a day or so now?"

She shook her head, her blue-blonde coiff burning his face.

"Time is too dear," she whispered in mock-Camille pathos, "and the days of the Parties are without end.—You ask me to cut years off my life and hand them to you."

"That's right."

"You ask too much," she smiled.

He wanted to curse her right then and walk away, but he wanted even moreso to stay with her. He was twenty-seven, an age of which he did not approve in the first place, and he had spent all of the year 1999 wanting her. He had decided two years ago that

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he was going to fall in love and marry—because he could finally afford to do so without altering his standards of living. Lacking a woman who combined the better qualities of Aphrodite and a digital computer, he had spent an entire year on safari, trekking after the spoor of his starcrossed.

THE invitation to the Bledsoes Orbitting New Year—which had hounded the old year around the world, chasing it over the International Date Line and off of the Earth entirely, to wherever old years go—had set him back a month's pay, but had given him his first live glimpse of Leota Mathilde Mason, belle of the Sleepers. Forgetting about digital computers, he decided then and there to fall in love with her. He was old-fashioned in many respects.

He had spoken with her for precisely ninety-seven seconds, the first twenty of which had been Arctic. But he realized that she existed to be admired, so he insisted on admiring her. Finally, she consented to be seen dancing with him at the Millenium Party in Stockholm.

He had spent the following year anticipating her seduction back to a reasonable and human mode of existence. Now, in the most beautiful city in the world, she had just informed him that she was bored and was about to retire until Bastille Day. It was then that Primitive Moore realized what Civilized Moore must really have known all along: the next time that he saw her she would be approximately two days older and he would be going on twenty-nine. Time stands still for the Set, but the price of mortal existence is age. Money could buy her the most desirable of all narcissist indulgences: the cold-bunk.

And he had not even had the chance of a Stockholm snowflake in the Congo to speak with her, to speak more than a few disjointed sentences, let alone to try talking her out of the icebox club. (Even now, Setman laureate Wayne Unger was moving to cut in on him, with the self-assured expression of a golf pro about to give a lesson.)

"Hello, Leota.—Sorry, mister Uh."

Primitive Moore snarled and bashed him with his club; Civilized Moore, without a word, released one of the most inaccessible women in the world to a god of the Set.

She was smiling. He was smiling. They were gone.

All the way around the world to San Francisco, sitting in the bar of the stratocruiser, in the year of Our Lord Two Thousand—that is to say: two, zero, zero, zero—Moore felt that Time was out of joint.

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IT was two days before he made up his mind what he was going to do about it.

He asked himself (from the blister balcony of his suite in the Hundred Towers of the Hilton-Frisco Complex): *Is* this the girl I want to marry?

He answered himself (Looking alternately at the traffic capillaries below his shoetops and the Bay): Yes.

Why? he wanted to know.

Because she is beautiful, he answered, and the future will be lovely. I want her for my beautiful wife in the lovely future.

So he decided to join the Set.

He realized it was no mean feat he was mapping out. First, he required money, lots of money—green acres of Presidents, to be strewn properly in the proper places. The next requisite was distinction, recognition. Unfortunately, the world was full of electrical engineers, humming through their twenty-hour weeks, dallying with pet projects—competent, capable, even inspired—who did not have these things. So he knew it would be difficult.

He submerged himself into research with a unique will: forty, sixty, eighty hours a week he spent — reading, designing, studying taped courses in subjects he had never needed. He gave up on recreation.

By May, when he received his invitation, he stared at the engraved (not fac-copy) parchment (not jot-sheet) with bleary eyes. He had already had nine patents entered and three more were pending. He had sold one and was negotiating with Akwa Mining over a water purification process which he had, he felt, fallen into. Money he would have, he decided, if he could keep up the pace.

Possibly even some recognition. That part now depended mainly on his puro-process and what he did with the money. Leota (nee Lorelei) lurked beneath his pages of formulae, was cubed Braquelike in the lines on his sketcher; she burnt as he slept, slept as he burned.

In June he decided he needed a rest.

"Assistant Division Chief Moore," he told the face in the groomer (his laudatory attitude toward work had already earned him a promotion at the Seal-Lock Division of Pressure Units, Corporate), "you need more French and better dancing."

The groomer hands patted away at his sandy stubble and slashed smooth the shagginess above his ears. The weary eyes before him agreed bluely; they were tired of studying abstractions.

The intensity of his recreation, however, was as fatiguing

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in its own way as his work had been. His muscle tone *did* improve as he sprang weightlessly through the Young Men's Christian Association Satellite-3 Trampoline Room; his dance steps seemed more graceful after he had spun with a hundred robots and ten dozen women; he took the accelerated Berlitz drug-course in French (eschewing the faster electrocerebral-stimulation series, because of a rumored transference that might slow his reflexes later that summer); and he felt that he was beginning to *sound* better—he had hired a gabcoach, and he bakeovened Restoration plays into his pillow (and hopefully, into his head) whenever he slept (generally every third day now)—so that, as the day of the Fête drew near, he began feeling like a Renaissance courtier (a tired one).

As he stared at Civilized Moore inside his groomer, Primitive Moore wondered how long that feeling would last.

Two days before Versailles he cultivated a uniform tan and decided what he was going to say to Leota this time:

—I love you? (Hell, no!)

—Will you quit the cold circuit? (Un-uh.)

—If I join the Set, will you join me? (That seemed the best way to put it.)

Their third meeting, then, was to be on different terms. No more stakeouts in the wastes of the prosaic. The hunter was going to enter the brush. "Onward!" grinned the Moore in the groomer, "and Excelsior!"

SHE was dressed in a pale blue, mutie orchid corsage. The revolving dome of the palace spun singing zodiacs and the floors floresced witch-fires. He had the uncomfortable feeling that the damned flowers were growing there, right above her left breast, like an exotic parasite; and he resented their intrusion with a parochial possessiveness that he knew was not of the Renaissance. Nevertheless . . .

"Good evening. How do your flowers grow?"

"Barely, and quite contrary," she decided, sipping something green through a long straw, "but they cling to life."

"With an understandable passion," he noted, taking her hand which she did not withdraw. "Tell me, Eve of the Microprosopos—where are you headed?"

Interest flickered across her face and came to rest in her eyes.

"Your French has improved, Adam—Kadmon . . .?" she noted. "I'm headed ahead. Where are you headed?"

"The same way."

"I doubt it—unfortunately."

"Doubt all you want, but we're parallel flows already."

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"Is that a conceit drawn from some engineering laureate?"

"Watch me engineer a cold-bunk," he stated.

Her eyes shot x-rays through him, warming his bones.

"I knew you had something on your mind. If you were serious."

"Us fallen spirits have to stick together here in Malkuth—I'm serious." He coughed and talked eyetalk. "Shall we stand together as though we're dancing. I see Unger, he see us, and I want you."

"All right."

She placed her glass on a drifting tray and followed him out onto the floor and beneath the turning zodiac, leaving Setman Unger to face a labyrinth of flesh. Moore laughed at his predicament.

"It's harder to tell identities at an anti-costume party."

She smiled.

"You know, you dance differently today than last night."

"I know. Listen, how do I get a private iceberg and a key to Schlerafenland? I've decided it might be amusing. I know that it's not a matter of genealogy, or even money for that matter, although both seem to help. I've read all the literature, but I could use some practical advice."

Her hand quivered ever so slightly in his own.

"You know of the Doyenne./?" she said/asked.

"Mainly rumors," he replied, "to the effect that she's an old gargoyle they've frozen to frighten away the Beast come Armageddon."

Leota did not smile. Instead, she became an arrow again.

"More or less," she replied coldly. "She does keep beastly people out of the Set."

Civilized Moore bit his tongue.

"Although many do not like her," she continued, becoming slightly more animated as she reflected, "I've always found her a rare little piece of chinoiserie. I'd like to take her home, if I had a home, and set her on my mantle, if I had a mantle."

"I've heard that she'd fit right into the Victorian Room at the NAM Galleries," Moore ventured.

"She *was* born during Vicky's reign—and she *was* in her eighties when the cold-bunk was developed—but I can safely say that the matter goes no further."

"And she decided to go gallivanting through Time at that age?"

"Precisely, inasmuch as she wishes to be the immortal arbiter of trans-society."

THEY turned with the music. Leota had relaxed once more.

"At 110 she's already on her way to becoming an archetype,' Moore noted. "Is that one of the reasons interviews are so hard to come by?"

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"One of the reasons . . ." she told him. "If, for example, you were to petition Party Set now, you would still have to wait until next summer for the interview—provided you reached that stage."

"How many are there on the roster of eligibles?"

She shut her eyes.

"I don't know. Thousands, I should say. She'll only see a few dozen, of course. The others will have been weeded out, pruned off, investigated away, and variously disqualified by the directors. Then, naturally, *she* will have the final say as to who is *in*."

Suddenly green and limpid—as the music, the lights, the ultrasonics, and the delicate narcotic fragrances of the air altered subtly—the room became a dark, cool place at the bottom of the sea, heady and nostalgic as the mind of a mermaid staring upon the ruins of Atlantis. The elegiac genius of the hall drew them closer together by a kind of subtle gravitation, and she was cool and adhesive as he continued:

"What is her power, really? I've read the tapes, I know she's a big stockholder, but so what? Why can't the directors vote around her. If I paid out—"

"They *wouldn't*" she said. "Her money means nothing. She is an institution.

"Hers is the quality of exclusiveness which keeps the Set the Set," she went on. "Imitators will always fail because they lack her discrimination. They'll take in any boorish body who'll pay. *That* is the reason that People Who Count," (she pronounced the capitals), "will neither attend nor sponsor any but Set functions. All exclusiveness would vanish from the earth if the Set lowered its standards."

"Money is money," said Moore. "If others paid the same for their parties . . ."

". . . Then the People who take their money would cease to Count. The Set would boycott them. They would lose their élan, be looked upon as hucksters."

"It sounds like a rather vicious moebius."

"It is a caste system with checks and balances. Nobody really wants it to break down."

"Even those who wash out?"

"Silly! They'd be the last. There's nothing to stop them from buying their own bunkers, if they can afford it, and waiting another five years to try again. They'd be wealthier anyhow for the wait, if they invest properly. Some have waited decades, and are still waiting. Some have made it after years of persisting. It makes the game more interesting, the achievement more satisfying. In a world of physical ease, brutal social equality, and reasonable economic equality, ex-

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clusiveness in frivolity becomes the most sought-after of all distinctions."

" 'Commodities,' " he corrected.

"No," she stated, "it is not for sale. Try buying it if money is all you have to offer."

THAT brought his mind back to more immediate considerations.

"What *is* the cost, if all the other qualifications are met?"

"The rule on that is sufficiently malleable to permit an otherwise qualified person to meet his dues. He guarantees his tenure, bunkwise or Party-wise, until such a time as his income offsets his debt. So if he only possesses a modest fortune, he may still be quite eligible. This is necessary if we are to preserve our democratic ideals."

She looked away, looked back.

"Usually a step-scale of percentages on the returns from his investments is arranged. In fact, a Set counsellor will be right there when you liquidate your assets, and he'll recommend the best conversions."

"Set must clean up on this."

"*Certainement.* It *is* a business, and the Parties don't come cheaply. But then, you'd be a part of Set yourself—being a shareholder is one of the membership requirements—and we're a restricted corporation, paying high dividends. Your principal will grow. If you were to be accepted, join, and then quit after even one subjective month, something like twenty actual years would have passed. You'd be a month older and much wealthier when you leave—and perhaps somewhat wiser."

"Where do I go to put my name on the list?"

He knew, but he had hopes.

"We can call it in tonight, from here. There is always someone in the office. You will be visited in a week or so, after the preliminary investigation."

"Investigation?"

"Nothing to worry about. Or have you a criminal record, a history of insanity, or a bad credit rating?"

Moore shook his head.

"No, no, and no."

"Then you'll pass."

"But will I actually have a chance of getting in, against all those others?"

It was as though a single drop of rain fell upon his chest.

"Yes," she replied, putting her cheek into the hollow of his neck and staring out over his shoulder so that he could not see her expression, "you'll make it all the way to the lair of Mary Maude Mullen with a member sponsoring you. That final hurdle will depend on yourself."

"Then I'll make it," he told her.

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". . . The interview may only last seconds. She's quick, her decisions are almost instantameous, and she's never wrong."

"Then I'll make it," he repeated, exulting.

Above them, the zodiac rippled.

MOORE found Darryl Wilson in a barmat in the Poconos. The actor had gone to seed; he was not the man Moore remembered from the award-winning frontier threelie series. That man had been a crag-browed, bushy-faced Viking of the prairies. In four years' time a facial avalanche had occurred, leaving its gaps and runnels across his expensive frown and dusting the face fur a shade lighter. Wilson had left it that way and cauterized his craw with the fire water he had denied the Red Man weekly. Rumor had it he was well into his second liver.

Moore sat beside him and inserted his card into the counter slot. He punched out a Martini and waited. When he noticed that the man was unaware of his presence, he observed, "You're Darryl Wilson and I'm Alvin Moore. I want to ask you something."

The straight-shooting eyes did not focus.

"News media man?"

"No, an old fan of yours," he lied.

"Ask away then," said the still-familiar voice. "You are a camera."

"Mary Maude Mullen, the bitch-goddess of the Set," he said. "What's she like?"

The eyes finally focussed.

"You up for deification this session?"

"That's right."

"What do you think?"

Moore waited, but there were no more words, so he finally asked, "About what?"

"Anything. You name it."

Moore took a drink. He decided to play the game if it would make the man more tractable.

"I think I like Martinis," he stated. "Now—"

"Why?"

Moore growled. Perhaps Wilson was too far gone to be of any help. Still, one more try . . .

"Because they're relaxing and bracing, both at the same time, which is something I need after coming all this way."

"Why do you want to be relaxed and braced?"

"Because I prefer it to being tense and unbraced."

"Why?"

"What the hell is all this?"

"You lose. Go home."

Moore stood.

"Suppose I go out again and come back in and we start over? Okay?"

"Sit down. My wheels turn slowly but they still turn," said

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Wilson. "We're talking about the same thing. You want to know what Mary Maude is like. —That's what she's like—all interrogatives. Useless ones. Attitudes are a disease that no one's immune to, and they vary so easily in the same person. In two minutes she'll have you stripped down to them, and your answers will depend on biochemistry and the weather. So will her decision. There's nothing I can tell you. She's pure caprice. She's life. She's ugly."

"That's all?"

"She refuses the wrong people. That's enough. Go away."

Moore finished his Martini and went away.

THAT winter Moore made a fortune. A modest one, to be sure.

He quit his job for a position with the Akwa Mining Research Lab, Oahu Division. It added ten minutes to his commuting time, but the title, Processing Director, sounded better than Assistant Division Chief, and he was anxious for a new sound. He did not slacken the pace of his force-fed social acceptability program, and one of its results was a January lawsuit.

The Set, he had been advised, preferred divorced male candidates to the perpetually single sort. For this reason, he had consulted a highly-rated firm of marriage contractors and entered into a three-month renewable, single partner drop-option contract, with Diane Demetrios, an unemployed model of Greek-Lebanese extraction.

One of the problems of modelling, he decided later, was that there were too many surgically-perfected female eidolons in the labor force; it was a rough profession in which to stay employed. His newly-acquired status had been sufficient inducement to cause Diane to press a breach of promise suit on the basis of an alleged oral agreement that the option *would* be renewed.

Burgess Social Contracting Services of course sent a properly obsequious adjuster, and they paid the court costs as well as the medfees for Moore's broken nose. (Diane had hit him with *The Essentials of Dress Display,* a heavy, illustrated talisman of a manual, which she carried about in a plastic case—as he slept beside their pool—plastic case and all.)

So, by the month of March Moore felt ready and wise and capable of facing down the last remaining citizen of the nineteenth century.

By May, though, he was beginning to feel he had overtrained. He was tempted to take a month's psychiatric leave from his work, but he recalled Leota's question about a history of in-

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sanity. He vetoed the notion and thought of Leota. The world stood still as his mind turned. Guiltily, he realized that he had not thought of her for months. He had been too busy with his autodidactics, his new job, and Diane Demetrios to think of the Setqueen, his love.

He chuckled.

Vanity, he decided, I want her because everyone wants her.

No, that wasn't true either, exactly . . . He wanted—what?

He thought upon his motives.

He realized, then, that his goals had shifted; the act had become the actor. What he really wanted, first and foremost, impure and unsimple, was an in to the Set—that century-spanning stratocruiser, luxury class, jetting across tomorrow and tomorrow and all the days that followed after—to ride high, like those gods of old who appeared at the rites of the equinoxes, slept between precessions, and were remanifest with each new season, the bulk of humanity living through all those dreary days that lay between. To be a part of Leota was to be a part of the Set, and that was what he wanted now. So of course it was vanity. It was love.

He laughed aloud. His autosurf initialled the blue lens of the Pacific like a manned diamond, casting the sharp cold chips of its surface up and into his face.

RETURNING from absolute zero, Lazarus-like, is neither painful nor disconcerting, at first. There are no sensations at all until one achieves the temperature of a reasonably warm corpse. By that time though, an injection of nirvana flows within the boyd's thawed rivers.

It is only when consciousness begins to return, thought Mrs. Mullen, to return with sufficient strength so that one fully realizes what has occurred—that the wine has survived another season in an uncertain cellar, its vintage grown rarer still—only then does an unpronounceable fear enter into the mundane outlines of the bedroom furniture—for a moment.

It is more a superstitious attitude than anything, a mental quaking at the possibility that the stuff of life, one's own life, has in some indefinable way been tampered with. A micro-second passes, and then only the dim recollection of a bad dream remains.

She shivered, as though the cold was still locked within her bones, and she shook off the notion of nightmares past.

She turned her attention to the man in the white coat who stood at her elbow.

"What day is it?" she asked him.

He was a handful of dust in the winds of Time . . .

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"August eighteen, two thousand-two," answered the handful of dust. "How do you feel?"

"Excellent, thank you," she decided. "I've just touched upon a new century—this makes three I've visited—so why shouldn't I feel excellent? I intend to visit many more."

"I'm sure you will, madam."

The small maps of her hands adjusted the counterpane. She raised her head.

"Tell me what is new in the world."

The doctor looked away from the sudden acetylene burst behind her eyes.

"We have finally visited Neptune and Pluto," he narrated. "They are quite uninhabitable. It appears that man is alone in the solar system. The Lake Sahara project has run into more difficulties, but it seems that work may begin next spring now that those stupid French claims are near settlement . . ." Her eyes fused his dust to planes of glass.

"Another competitor, Future-time Gay, entered into the time-tank business three years ago," he recited, trying to smile, "but we met the enemy and they are ours—Set bought them out eight months ago. By the way, our own bunkers are now much more sophistica—"

"I repeat," she said, "what is new in the world, *doctor?*"

He shook his head, avoiding the look she gave him.

"We can lengthen the remissions now," he finally told her, "quite a time beyond what could be achieved by the older methods."

"A better delaying action?"

"Yes."

"But not a cure?"

He shook his head.

"In my case," she told him, "it has already been abnormally delayed. The older nostrums have already worn thin. For how long are the new ones good?"

"We still don't know. You have an unusual variety of M.S. and it's complicated by other things."

"Does a cure seem any nearer?"

"It could take another twenty years. We might have one tomorrow."

"I see." The brightness subsided. "You may leave now, young man. Turn on my advice tape as you go."

He was glad to let the machine take over.

DIANE DEMETRIOS dialled the library and requested the Setbook. She twirled the page-dial and stopped.

She studied the screen as though it were a mirror, her face undergoing a variety of expressions.

"I look just as good," she de-

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cided after a time. "Better, even. —Your nose could be changed, and your browline . . .

"If they weren't facial fundamentalists," she told the picture, "against surgery, lady—you'd be here and I'd be there.

"Bitch!"

* * *

The millionth barrel of converted seawater emerged, fresh and icy, from the Moore Purifier. Splashing from its chamber-tandem and flowing through the conduits, it was clean, useful, and singularly unaware of these virtues. Another transfusion of briney Pacific entered at the other hand.

The waste products were used in pseudoceramicware.

The man who designed the doubleduty Purifier was rich.

The temperature was 82° in Oahu.

The million-first barrel splashed forth . . .

* * *

They left Alvin Moore surrounded by china dogs.

Two of the walls were shelved, floor to ceiling. The shelves were lined with blue, green, pink, russet (not to mention ochre, vermillion, mauve and saffron) dogs, mainly glazed (although some were dry-rubbed primitives), ranging from the size of a largish cockroach up to that of a pigmy warthog. Across the room a veritable hades of a wood fire roared its metaphysical challenge into the hot July of Bermuda.

Set above it was a mantlepiece bearing more dogs.

Set beside the hellplace was a desk, at which was seated Mary Maude Mullen, wrapped in a green and black tartan. She studied Moore's file, which lay opened on the blotter. When she spoke to him she did not look up.

Moore stood beside the chair which had not been offered him and pretended to study the dogs and the heaps of Georgian kindling that filled the room to overflowing.

While not overly fond of live dogs, Moore bore them no malice. But when he closed his eyes for a moment he experienced a feeling of claustrophobia.

These were not dogs. These were the unblinking aliens staring through the bars of the last Earthman's cage. Moore promised himself that he would say nothing complimentary about that garish rainbow of a hound-pack (fit, perhaps, for stalking a jade stag the size of a Chihuahua); he decided it could only have sprung from the mental crock of a monomaniac, or one possessed of a very feeble imagination and small respect for dogs.

After verifying all the generalities listed on his petition, Mrs. Mullen raised her pale eyes to his.

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"How do you like my doggies?" she asked him.

She sat there, a narrow-faced, wrinkled woman with flaming hair, a snub nose, an innocent expression, and the lingering twist of the question quirking her thin lips.

Moore quickly played back his last thoughts and decided to maintain his integrity in regards china dogs by answering objectively.

"They're quite colorful," he noted.

THIS was the wrong answer, he felt, as soon as he said it. The question had been too abrupt. He had entered the study ready to lie about anything but china dogs. So he smiled.

"There are a dreadful lot of them about. But of course they don't bark or bite or shed, or do other things . . ."

She smiled back.

"My dear little, colorful little collection of canines," she said. "They don't do anything. They're sort of symbolic. That's why I collect them too.

"Sit down," she gestured, "and pretend you're comfortable."

"Thanks."

"It says here that you rose only recently from the happy ranks of anonymity to achieve some sort of esoteric distinction in the sciences. Why do you wish to resign it now?"

"I wanted money and prestige, both of which I was given to understand would be helpful to a Set candidate."

"Aha! Then they were a means rather than an end?"

"That is correct."

"Then tell my why you want to join the Set."

He had written out the answer to that one months ago. It had been bakeovened into his brain, so that he could speak it with natural inflections. The words began forming themselves in his throat, but he let them die there. He had planned them for what he had thought would be maximum appeal to a fan of Tennyson's. Now he was not so sure.

Still . . . He broke down the argument and picked a neutral point—the part about following knowledge like a sinking star.

"There will be a lot of changes over the next several decades. I'd like to see them with a young man's eyes."

"As a member of the Set you will exist more to be seen than to see," she replied, making a note in his file. ". . . And I think we'll have to dye your hair if we accept you."

"The hell you say!—Pardon me, that slipped out."

"Good." She made another note. "We can't have them too inhibited—nor too uninhibited, for that matter. Your reaction was

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rather quaint." She looked up again.

"Why do you want so badly to see the future?"

He felt uneasy. It seemed as though she knew he was lying.

"Plain human curiosity," he answered weakly, "as well as some professional interest. Being an engineer—"

"We're not running a seminar," she observed. "You'd not be wasting much time outside of attending Parties if you wanted to last very long with the Set. In twenty years—no, ten—you'll be back in kindergarten so far as engineering is concerned. It will all be hieroglyphics to you. You don't read hieroglyphics, do you?"

He shook his head.

"Good," she continued, "I hate an inept comparison.—Yes, it will all be hieroglyphics, and if you should leave the Set you would be an unskilled draftsman —not that you'd have need to work. But if you were to want to work, you would have to be self-employed—which grows more and more difficult, almost too difficult to attempt, as time moves on. You would doubtless lose money."

He shrugged and raised his palms. He *had been thinking* of doing that. Fifty years, he had told himself, and we could kick the Set, be rich, and I could take refresher courses and try for a consultantship in marine engineering.

"I'd know enough to appreciate things, even if I couldn't participate," he explained.

"You'd be satisfied just to observe?"

"I think so," he lied.

"I doubt it." Her eyes nailed him again. "Do you think you are in love with Leota Mason? She nominated you, but of course that *is* her privilege."

"I don't know. I thought so at first, two years ago . . ."

"Infatuation is fine," she told him. "It makes for good gossip. Love, on the other hand, I will not tolerate. Purge yourself of such notions. Nothing is so boring and ungay at a Set affair. It does not make for gossip, it makes for snickers.

"So is it infatuation or love?"

"Infatuation," he decided.

She glanced into the fire, glanced at her hands.

"You will have to develop a Buddhist's attitude toward the world around you. That world will change from day to day. Whenever you stop to look at it, it will be a different world—unreal."

He nodded.

"Therefore, if you are to maintain your stability, the Set must be the center of all things. Wherever your heart lies, there also shall reside your soul."

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". . . And if you should happen not to like the future, whenever you do stop to take a look at it, remember, you *cannot* come back. Don't just think about that, *feel* it!"

He felt it.

She began jotting. Her right hand began suddenly to tremble. She dropped the pen and too carefully drew her hand back within the shawl.

"You are not so colorful as most candidates," she told him, too naturally, "but then, we're short on the soulful type at present. Contrast adds depth and texture to our displays. Go view all the tapes of our past Parties."

"I already have."

". . . And you can give your soul to that, or a significant part thereof?"

"Wherever my heart lies . . ."

"In that case, you may return to your lodgings, mister Moore. You will receive our decision today."

Moore stood. There were so many questions he had not been asked, so many things he had wanted to say, had forgotten, or had not had opportunity to say . . . Had she already decided to reject him? he wondered. Was that why the interview had been so brief? Still, her final remarks *had* been encouraging.

He escaped from the fragile kennel, all his pores feeling like fresh nail holes.

He lolled about the hotel pool all afternoon, and in the evening he moved into the bar. He did not eat dinner.

When he received the news that he had been accepted, he was also informed by the messenger that a small gift to his inquisitor was a thing of custom. Moore laughed drunkenly, foreseeing the nature of the gift.

Mary Maude Mullen received her first Pacificware dog from Oahu with a small, sad shrug that almost turned to a shudder. She began to tremble then, nearly dropping it from her fingers. Quickly she placed it on the bottommost shelf behind her desk and reached for her pills; later, the flames caused it to crack.

THEY were dancing. The sea was an evergreengold sky above the dome. The day was strangely young.

Tired remnants of the Party's sixteen hours, they clung to one another, feet aching, shoulders sloped. There were eight couples still moving on the floor, and the weary musicians fed them the slowest music they could make. Sprawled at the edges of the world, where the green bowl of the sky joined with the blue tiles of the earth, some five hundred people, garments loosened, mouths opened, stared like goldfish on a tabletop at the water behind the wall.

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"Think it'll rain?" he asked her.

"Yes," she answered.

"So do I. So much for the weather. Now, about that week on the moon—?"

"What's wrong with good old mother Earth?" she smiled.

Someone screamed. The sound of a slap occurred almost simultaneously. The screaming stopped.

"I've never been to the moon," he replied.

She seemed faintly amused.

"I have. I don't like it."

"Why?"

"It's the cold, crazy lights outside the dome," she said, "and the dark, dead rocks everywhere around the dome," she winced. "They make it seem like a cemetery at the end of Time . . ."

"Okay," he said, "forget it."

". . . And the feeling of disembodied lightness as you move about inside the dome—"

"All right!"

"I'm sorry." She brushed his neck with her lips. He touched her forehead with his. "The Set has lost its shellac," she smiled.

"We're not on tape anymore. It doesn't matter now."

A woman began sobbing somewhere near the giant seahorse that had been the refreshment table. The musicians played more loudly. The sky was full of luminiscent starfish, swimming moistly on their tractor beams. One of the starfish dripped salty water on them as it passed overhead.

"We'll leave tomorrow."

"Yes, tomorrow," she said.

"How about Spain?" he said. "This is the season of the sherries. There'll be the Juegos Florales de la Vendimia Jerezana. It may be the last."

"Too noisy," she said, "with all those fireworks."

"But gay."

"Gay," she sighed with a crooked mouth. "Let's go to Switzerland and pretend we're old, or dying of something romantic."

"Necrophilist," he grinned, slipping on a patch of moisture and regaining his balance. "Better it be a quiet loch in the Highlands, where you can have your fog and miasma and I can have my milk and honeydew unblended."

"Nay," she said, above a quick babble of drunken voices, "let's go to New Hampshire."

"What's wrong with Scotland?"

"I've never been to New Hampshire."

"I have, and *I* don't like it. It looks like your description of the moon."

A moth brushing against a candle flame, the tremor.

The frozen bolt of black lightning lengthened slowly in the green heavens. A sprinkling of soft rain began.

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AS she kicked off her shoes he reached out for the glass on the floating tray above his left shoulder. He drained it and replaced it.

"Tastes like someone's watering the drinks."

"Set must be economizing," she said.

Moore saw Unger then, glass in hand, standing at the edge of the floor watching them.

"I see Unger."

"So do I. He's swaying."

"So are we," he laughed.

The fat bard's hair was a snowy chaos and his left eye was swollen nearly shut. He collapsed with a bubbling murmur, spilling his drink. No one moved to help him.

"I believe he's overindulged himself again."

"Alas, poor Unger," she said without expression, "I knew him well."

The rain continued to fall and the dancers moved about the floor like the figures in some amateur puppet show.

"They're coming!" cried a non-Setman, crimson cloak flapping. "They're coming down!"

The water streamed into their eyes as every conscious head in the Party Dome was turned upward. Three silver zeppelins grew in the cloudless green.

"They're coming for us," observed Moore.

"They're going to make it!"

The music had paused momentarily, like a pendulum at the end of its arc. It began again.

Good night, ladies, played the band, *good night, ladies . . .*

"We're going to live!"

"We'll go to Utah," he told her, eyes moist, "where they don't have seaquakes and tidal waves."

Good night, ladies . . .

"We're going to live!"

She squeezed his hand.

"Merrily we roll along," the voices sang, *"roll along . . ."*

" 'Roll along,' " she said.

" 'Merrily,' " he answered.

'O'er the deep blue sea!"

A SET-MONTH after the nearest thing to a Set disaster on record (that is to say, in the year of Our Lord and President Cambert 2019, twelve years after the quake), Setman Moore and Leota (nee Lachesis) stood outside the Hall of Sleep on Bermuda Island. It was almost morning.

"I believe I love you," he mentioned.

"Fortunately, love does not require an act of faith," she noted, accepting a light for her cigar, "because I don't believe in anything."

"Twenty years ago I saw a lovely woman at a Party and I danced with her."

"Five weeks ago," she amended.

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"I wondered then if she would ever consider quitting the Set and going human again, and being heir to mortal ills."

"I have often wondered that myself," she said, "in idle moments. But she won't do it. Not until she is old and ugly."

"That means forever," he smiled sadly.

"You *are* noble." She blew smoke at the stars, touched the cold wall of the building. "Someday, when people no longer look at her, except for purposes of comparison with some fluffy child of the far future—or when the world's standards of beauty have changed—she'll transfer from the express run to the local and let the rest of the world go by."

"Whatever the station, she will be all alone in a strange town," said Moore. "Every day, it seems, they remodel the world. I met a fraternity brother at that dinner last night—pardon me, last year—and he treated me as if he were my father. His every other word was 'son' or 'boy' or 'kid', and he wasn't trying to be funny. He was responding to what he saw. My appetite was considerably diminished.

"Do you realize where we're going?" he asked the back of her head as she turned away to look out over the gardens of sleeping flowers. "Away! That's where. We can never go back! The world moves on while we sleep."

"Refreshing, isn't it?" she finally said. "And stimulating, and awe-inspiring. Not being bound, I mean. Everything burning. Us remaining. Neither time nor space can hold us, unless we consent.

"And I do not consent to being bound," she declared.

"To anything?"

"To anything."

"Supposing it's all a big joke."

"What?"

"The world.—Supposing every man, woman, and child died last year in an invasion by creatures from Alpha Centauri, everyone but the frozen Set. Supposing it was a totally effective virus attack . . ."

"There are no creatures in the Centauri System."

"Okay, someplace else then. Supposing all the remains and all the traces of chaos were cleaned up, and then one creature gestured with a flipper at this building." Moore slapped the wall. "The creature said: 'Hey! There are some live ones inside, on ice. Ask one of the sociologists whether they're worth keeping, or if we should open the refrigerator door and let them spoil.' Then one of the sociologists came and looked at us, all in our coffins of ice, and *he* said: 'They might be worth a few laughs and a dozen pages in an obscure periodical. So let's fool them into thinking that everything is going

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on just as it was before the invasion. All their movements, according to these schedules, are preplanned, so it shouldn't be too difficult. We'll fill their Parties with human simulacra packed with recording machinery and we'll itemize their behavior patterns. We'll vary their circumstances and they'll attribute it to progress. We can watch them perform in all sorts of situations that way. Then, when we're finished, we can always break their bunk-timers and let them sleep on—or open their doors and watch them spoil.'

"So they agreed to do it," finished Moore, "and here we are, the last people alive on Earth, cavorting before machines operated by inhuman creatures who are watching us for incomprehensible reasons."

"Then we'll give them a good show," she replied, "and maybe they'll applaud us once before we spoil."

She snubbed out her cigar and kissed him good night. They returned to their refrigerators.

IT was twelve weeks before Moore felt the need for a rest from the Party circuit. He was beginning to grow fearful. Leota had spent non-functional decades of her time vacationing with him, and she had recently been showing signs of sullenness, apparently regretting these expenditures on his behalf. So he decided to see something real, to take a stroll in the year 2078. After all, he was over a hundred years old.

The Queen Will Live Forever, said the faded clipping that hung in the main corridor of the Hall of Sleep. Beneath the bannerline was the old/recent story of the conquest of the final remaining problems of Multiple Sclerosis, and the medical ransom of one of its most notable victims. Moore had not seen the Doyenne since the day of his interview. He did not care whether he ever saw her again.

He donned a suit from his casualwear stylelocker and strolled through the gardens and out to the airfield. There were no people about.

He did not really know where he wanted to go until he stood before a ticket booth and the speaker asked him, "Destination, please."

"Uh—Oahu. Akwa Labs, if they have a landing field of their own."

"Yes, they do. That will have to be a private charter though, for the final fifty-six miles—"

"Give me a private charter all the way, both ways."

"Insert your card, please."

He did.

After five seconds the card popped back into his waiting hand. He dropped it into his pocket.

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"What time will I arrive?" he asked.

"Nine hundred thirty-two, if you leave on Dart Nine six minutes from now. Have you any luggage?"

"No."

"In that case, your Dart awaits you in area A-11."

Moore crossed the field to the VTO Dart numbered Nine. It flew by tape. The flight pattern, since it was a specially chartered run, had been worked out back at the booth, within milli-seconds of Moore's naming his destination. It was then broadcast-transferred to a blank tape inside Dart Nine; an auto-alternation brain permitted the Dart to correct its course in the face of unforeseen contingencies and later recorrect itself, landing precisely where it was scheduled to come down.

Moore mounted the ramp and stopped to slip his card into the slot beside the hatchway. The hatch swung open and he collected his card and entered. He selected a seat beside a port and snapped its belt about his middle. At this, the hatchway swung itself shut.

There was a brief dialogue in machinetalk, fore and aft, and the Dart lifted into the sky.

AFTER a few minutes the belt unfastened itself and vanished into the arms of his seat. The Dart was cruising smoothly now.

"Do you wish to have the lights dimmed? Or would you prefer to have them brighter?" asked a voice at his side.

"They're fine just the way they are," he told the invisible entity.

"Would you care for something to eat? Or something to drink?"

"I'll have a Martini."

There was a sliding sound, followed by a muted click. A tiny compartment opened in the wall beside him. His Martini rested within.

He removed it and took a sip.

Beyond the port and toward the rear of the Dart, a faint blue nimbus arose from the sideplates.

"Would you care for anything else?" *Pause.* "Shall I read you an article on the subject of your choice?" *Pause.* "Or fiction?" *Pause.* "Or poetry?" *Pause.* "Would you care to view the catalog?" *Pause.* "Or perhaps you would prefer music?"

"Poetry?" repeated Moore.

"Yes, I have many of—"

"I know a poet," he remembered. "Have you anything by Wayne Unger?"

There followed a brief mechanical meditation, then:

"Wayne Unger. Yes," answered the voice. "On call are his *Paradise Unwanted, Fungi of Steel,* and *Chisel in the Sky.*"

"Which is his most recent?"

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"*Chisel in the Sky is the one.*"

"Read it to me."

The voice began by reading him all the publishing data and copyright information. To Moore's protests it answered that it was a matter of law and cited a precedent case. Moore asked for another Martini and waited.

Finally, " 'Our Wintered Way Through Evening, and Burning Bushes Along It,' " said the voice.

"Huh?"

"That is the title of the first poem."

"Oh, read on."

" '(Where only the evergreens whiten . . .)
Winterflakes ashes heighten
in towers of blizzard.
Silhouettes unseal an outline.
Darkness, like an absence of faces,
pours from the opened home;
it seeps through shattered pine
and flows the fractured maple.
Perhaps it is the essence senescent,
dreamculled from the sleepers,
that soaks upon this road
in weather-born excess.
Or perhaps the great Anti-Life
learns to paint with a vengeance,
to run an icicle down the gargoyle's eye.
For properly speaking, though
no one can confront himself *in toto*,
I see your falling sky, gone gods,
as in a smoke-filled dream
of ancient statues burning,
soundlessly, down to the ground.
(. . . and never the ever-white's green.)' "

THERE was a ten-second pause, then: "The next poem is entitled—"

"Wait a minute," asked Moore. "That first one—? Are you programmed to explain anything about it?"

"I am sorry, I am not. That would require a more complicated unit."

"Repeat the copyright data."

"2016, in the North American Union—"

"And it's his most recent work?"

"Yes, he is a member of Party Set and there is generally a lapse of several decades between his books."

"Continue reading."

The machine read on. Moore knew little concerning verse, but he was struck by the continual references to ice and cold, to snow and sleep.

"Stop," he told the machine. "Have you anything of his from before he joined the Set?"

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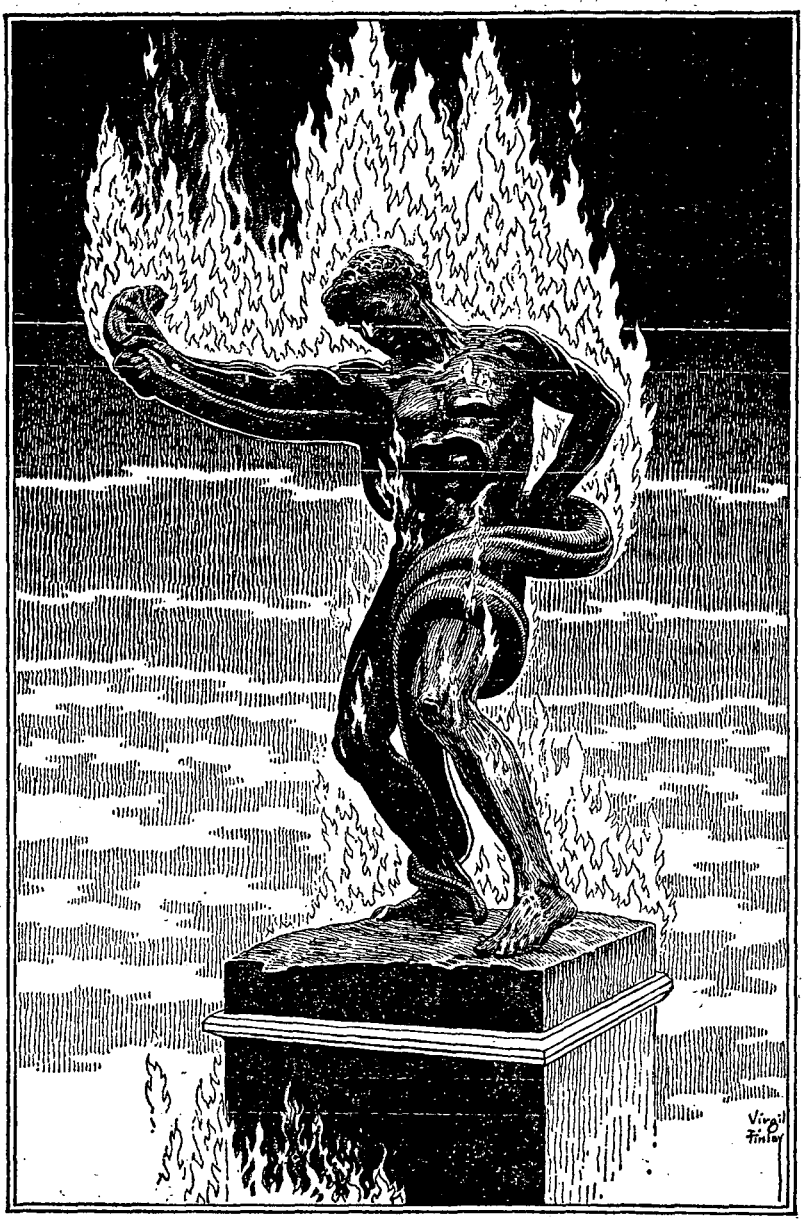

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"Paradise Unwanted was published in 1981, two years after he became a member. According to its Forward, however, most of it was written prior to his joining."

"Read it."

Moore listened carefully. It contained little of ice, snow, or sleep. He shrugged at this minor discovery. His seat immediately adjusted and readjusted to the movement.

He barely knew Unger. He did not like his poetry. He did not like most poetry, though.

The reader began another.

" 'In the Dogged House,' " it said.

" 'The heart is a graveyard of crigas,
hid far from the hunter's eye,
where love wears death like enamel
and dogs crawl in to die . . .' "

Moore smiled as it read the other stanzas. Recognizing its source, he liked that one somewhat better.

"Stop reading," he told the machine.

He ordered a light meal and thought about Unger. He had spoken with him once. When was it?

2017 . . .? Yes, at the Free Workers' Liberation Centennial in the Lenin Palace.

It was rivers of vodka . . .

Fountains of juices, like inhuman arteries slashed, spurted their bright umbrellas of purple and lemon and green and orange. Jewels to ransom an Emir flashed near many hearts. Their host, Premier Korlov, seemed a happy frost giant in his display.

. . . In a dance pavillion of polaroid crystal, with the world outside blinking off and on, on and off—like an advertisement, Unger had commented, both elbows resting on the bartop and his foot on the indispensable rail.

His head had swivelled as Moore approached. He was a bleary-eyed albino owl. "Albion Boore, I believe," he had said, extending a hand. "Quo vadis dammit?"

"Grape juice and wadka," said Moore to the unnecessary human standing beside the mix-machine. The uniformed man pressed two buttons and passed the glass across the two feet of frosty mahogany. Moore twitched it toward Unger in a small salute. "A happy Free Workers' Liberatiin Centennial to you."

"I'll drink to liberation." The poet leaned forward and poked his own combination of buttons. The man in the uniform sniffed audibly.

THEY drank a drink together. "They accuse us," Unger's

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gesture indicated the world at large, "of neither knowing nor caring anything about un-Set things, un-Set people."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"Oh yes, but it might be expanded upon. We're the same way with our fellows. Be honest now, how many Setmen are you acquainted with?"

"Quite a few."

"I didn't ask how many names you knew."

"Well, I talk with them all the time Our environment is suited to much movement and many words—and we have all the time in the world. How many friends do *you* have?" he asked.

"I just finished one," grunted the poet, leaning forward. "I'm going to mix me another."

Moore didn't feel like being depressed or joked with and he was not sure which category this fell into. He had been living inside a soap bubble since after the ill-starred Davy Jones Party, and he did not want anyone poking sharp things in his direction.

"So, you're your own man. If you're not happy in the Set, leave."

"You're not being a true *tovarisch*," said Unger, shaking a finger. "There was a time when a man could tell his troubles to bartenders and barfriends. You wouldn't remember, though—those days went out when the nickle-plated barmatics came in. Damn their exotic eyes and scientific mixing!"

Suddenly he punched out three drinks in rapid succession. He slopped them across the dark, shiny surface.

"Taste them! Sip each of them!" he enjoined Moore. "Can't tell them apart without a scorecard, can you?"

"They're dependable that way."

"Dependable? Hell yes! Depend on them to create neurotics. One time a man could buy a beer and bend an ear. All that went out when the dependable mix-machines came in. Now we join a talk-out club or an act-out-myths club and drink in silence—'tis a sign of manic change and most unnatural! Oh, had the Mermaid been such!" he complained in false notes of frenzy. "Or the Bloody Lion of Stepney! What jaded jakes the fellows of Marlowe had been!"

He sagged.

"Aye! Drinking's not what it used to be."

The international language of his belch caused the mix-machine attendant to avert his face, which betrayed a pained expression before he did so.

"So I'll repeat my question," stated Moore, making conversation. "Why do you stay where you're unhappy? You could go open a real bar of your own, if that's what you'd like. It would

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probably be a success, now that I think of it—people serving drinks and all that."

"Go to! Go to! I shan't say where!" He stared at nothing. "Maybe that's what I'll do someday, though," he reflected, "open a real bar . . ."

MOORE turned his back to him then, to watch Leota dancing with Korlov. He was happy.

"People join the Set for a variety of reasons," Unger was muttering, "but the main one is exhibitionism, with the titillating wraith of immortality lurking at the stage door, perhaps. Attracting attention to oneself gets harder and harder as time goes on. It's almost impossible in the sciences. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries you could still name great names—now it's great research teams. The arts have been democratized out of existence—and where have all the audiences gone? I don't mean spectators either.

"So we have the Set," he continued. "Take our sleeping beauty there, dancing with Korlov—"

"Huh?"

"Pardon me, I didn't mean to awaken you abruptly. I was saying that if she wanted attention Miss Mason couldn't be a stripper today, so she had to join the Set. It's even better than being a threelie star, and it requires less work—"

"Stripper?" Moore queried.

"A folk artist who undressed to music."

"Yes, I recall hearing of them."

"That's gone too, though," sighed Unger, "and while I cannot disapprove of the present customs of dress and undress, it still seems to me as if something bright and frail died in the elder world."

"She *is* bright, isn't she?"

"Decidedly so."

They had taken a short walk then, outside, in the cold night of Moscow. Moore did not really want to leave, but he had had enough to drink so that he was easy to persuade. Besides that, he did not want the stumbling babbler at his side to fall into an excavation or wander off lost, to miss his flight or turn up injured. So they shuffled up bright avenues and down dim streets until they came to the Square. They stopped before a large, dilapidated monument. The poet broke a small limb from a shrub and bent it into a wreathe. He tossed it against the wall.

"Poor fellow," he muttered.

"Who?"

"The guy inside."

"Who's that?"

Unger cocked his head at him.

"You really don't know?"

"I admit there are gaps in my education, if that's what you mean. I continually strive to fill them, but I always was weak on

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history. I specialized at an early age."

Unger jerked his thumb at the monument.

"Noble Macbeth lies in state within," he said. "He was an ancient king who slew his predecessor, noble Duncan, most heinously. Lots of other people too. When he took the throne he promised he'd be nice to his subjects, though. But the Slavic temperament is a strange thing. He is best remembered for his many fine speeches, which were translated by a man named Pasternak. Nobody reads them anymore."

UNGER sighed and seated himself on a stair. Moore joined him. He was too cold to be insulted by the arrogant mocking of the drunken poet.

"Back then, people used to fight wars," said Unger.

"I know," responded Moore, his fingers freezing, "Napoleon once burnt part of this city."

Unger tipped his hat.

Moore scanned the skyline. A bewildering range of structures hedged the Square—here, bright and functional, a ladder-like office building composed its heights and witnessed distances, as only the planned vantages of the very new can manage; there, was now a dark mirror, a place a daytime aquarium of an agency where the confidence-inspiring efficiencies of rehearsed officials were displayed before the onlooker; and across the Square, its purged youth fully restored by shadow, a deserted onion of a cupola poked its sharp topknot after soaring vehicles, a number of which, scuttling among the star fires, were indicated even now—and Moore blew upon his fingers and jammed his hands into his pockets.

"Yes, nations went to war," Unger was saying. "Artilleries thundered. Blood was spilled. People died. But we lived through it, crossing a shaky Shinvat word by word. Then one day there it was. Peace. It had been that way a long time before anyone noticed. We still don't know how we did it. Perpetual postponement and a short memory, I guess, as man's attention became occupied twenty-four hours a day with other things. Now there is nothing left to fight over, and everyone is showing off the fruits of peace—because everyone has some, by the roomful. All they want. More. These things that fill the rooms, though," he mused, "and the mind—how they have proliferated! Each month's version is better than the last, in some hypersophisticated manner. They seem to have absorbed the minds that are absorbed with them . . ."

"We could all go live in the woods," said Moore, wishing he had taken the time to pocket a

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battery crystal and a thermostat for his suit.

"We could do lots of things, and we will, eventually—I suppose. Still, I guess we *could* wind up in the woods, at that."

"In that case, let's go back to the Palace while there's still time. I'm frozen."

"Why not?"

They climbed to their feet, began walking back.

"Why *did* you join the Set anyhow? So you could be discontent over the centuries?"

"Nay, son," the poet clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm an audience in search of an entertainment.

It took Moore an hour to get the chill out of his bones.

AHEM. A hem,'" said the voice. "We are about to land at Akwa Labs, Oahu."

The belt snaked out into Moore's lap. He snapped it tight.

A sudden feeling prompted him to ask: "Read me that last poem from *Chisel* again."

" 'Future Be Not Impatient,' " stated the voice:

" 'Someday, perhaps, but not this day.
Sometime; but then, not now.
Man is a monument-making mammal.
Never ask me how.' "

He thought of Leota's description of the moon and he hated Unger for the forty-four seconds it took him to disembark. He was not certain why.

He stood beside Dart Nine and watched the approach of a small man wearing a smile and gay tropical clothing. He shook hands automatically.

". . . Very pleased," the man named Teng was saying, "and glad there's not much around for you to recognize anymore. We've been deciding what to show you ever since Bermuda called."

Moore pretended to be aware of the call.

". . . Not many people remember their employers from as far back as you do," Teng was saying.

Moore smiled and fell into step with him, heading toward the Processing Complex.

"Yes, I was curious," he agreed, "to see what it all looks like now. My old office, my lab—"

"Gone, of course."

". . . our first chamber-tandem, with its big-nozzled injectors—"

"Replaced, naturally."

"Naturally. —And the big old pumps . . ."

"Shiny and new."

Moore brightened. The sun, which he had not seen for several days/years, felt good on his back, but the air conditioning felt even better as they entered the first building. There was something of beauty in the pure functional

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compactness of everything about them, something Unger might have called by a different name, he realized, but it was beauty to Moore. He ran his hand along the sides of the units he did not have time to study. He tapped the conduits and peered into the kilns which processed the by-product ceramicware; he nodded approval and paused to relight his pipe whenever the man at his side asked his opinion of something too technically remote for him to have any opinion.

They crossed catwalks, moved through the temple-like innards of shut-down tanks, traversed alleyways where the silent, blinking panels indicated that unseen operations were in progress. Occasionally they met a worker, seated before a sleeping trouble-board, watching a broadcast entertainment or reading something over his portable threelie. Moore shook hands and forgot names.

PROCESSING Director Teng could not help but be partly hypnotized—both by Moore's youthful appearance and the knowledge that he had developed a key process at some past date (as well as by his apparent understanding of present operations)—into believing that he was an engineer of his own breed, and up-to-date in his education. Actually, Mary Mullen's prediction that his profession would some day move beyond the range of his comprehension had not yet come to pass—but he could see that it was the direction in which he was headed. Appropriately, he had noticed his photo gathering dust in a small lobby, amid those of Teng's other dead and retired predecessors.

Sensing this feeling, Moore asked, "Say, do you think I could have my old job back?"

The man's head jerked about. Moore remained expressionless.

"Well—I suppose—something—could be worked . . ." he ended lamely as Moore broke into a grin and twisted the question back into casual conversation It was somehow amusing to have produced that sudden, strange look of realization on the man's bored face, as he actually *saw* Moore for the first time. Frightening, too.

"Yes, seeing all this progress is—inspiring," Moore pronounced. "It's almost enough to make a man want to work again. —Glad I don't have to, of course. But there's a bit of nostalgia involved in coming back after all these years and seeing how this place grew out of the shoestring operation it seemed then—grew into more buildings than I could walk through in a week, and all of them packed with new hardware and working away to beat the band. Smooth. Efficient. I like

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it. I suppose you like working here?"

"Yes," sighed Teng, "as much as a man can like working. Say, were you planning on staying overnight? There's a weekly employees' luau and you'd be very welcome." He glanced at the wafer of a watchface clinging to his wrist. "In fact, it's already started," he added.

"Thanks," said Moore, "but I have a date and I have to be going. I just wanted to reaffirm my faith in progress. Thanks for the tour, and thanks for your time."

"Any time." Teng steered him toward a lush Break Room. "You won't be wanting to Dart back for awhile yet, will you?" he said. "So while we're having a bite to eat in here I wonder if I could ask you some questions about the Set. Its entrance requirements in particular . . ."

* * *

All the way around the world to Bermuda, getting happily drunk in the belly of Dart Nine, in the year of Our Lord twenty seventy-eight, Moore felt that Time had been put aright.

* * *

SO you want to have it./?" said/asked Mary Maude, uncoiling carefully from the caverns of her shawl.

"Yes."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I do not destroy that which belongs to me. I possess so very little as it is."

The Doyenne snorted gently, perhaps in amusement. She tapped her favorite dog, as though seeking a reply from it.

"Though it sails upon a bottomless sea toward some fabulous orient," she mused, "the ship will still attempt to lower an anchor. I do not know why. Can you tell me? Is it simply carelessness on the part of the captain? Or the second mate?"

The dog did not answer. Neither did anything else.

"Or is it a mutineer's desire to turn around and go back?" she inquired. "To return home?"

There was a brief stillness. Finally:

"I live in a succession of homes. They are called hours. Each is lovely."

"But not lovely enough, and never to be revisited, eh? Permit me to anticipate your next words: 'I do not intend to marry. I do not intend to leave the Set. I shall have my child—' By the way, what will it be, a boy or a girl?"

"A girl."

"'—I shall have my daughter. I shall place her in a fine home, arrange her a glorious future, and be back in time for the Spring Festival.'" She rubbed her glazed dog as though it were a crystal and pretended to peer through its greenish opacity.

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"Am I not a veritable gipsy?" she asked.

"Indeed."

"And you think this will work out?"

"I fail to see why it should not."

"Tell me which her proud father will do," she inquired, "compose her a sonnet sequence, or design her mechanical toys?"

"Neither. He shall never know. He'll be asleep until spring, and I will not. *She* must never know either."

"So much the worse."

"Why, pray tell?"

"Because she will become a woman in less than two months, by the clocks of the Set—and a lovely woman, I daresay—because she will be able to afford loveliness."

"Of course."

"And, as the daughter of a member, she will be eminently eligible for Set candidacy."

"She may not want it."

"Only those who cannot achieve it allude to having those sentiments. No, she'll want it. Everyone does. —And, if her beauty should be surgically obtained, I believe that I shall, in this instance, alter a rule of mine. I shall pass on her and admit her to the Set. She will then meet many interesting people—poets, engineers, her mother . . ."

"No! I'd tell her, before I'd permit that to happen!"

"Aha! Tell me, is your fear of incest predicated upon your fear of competition, or is it really the other way around?"

"Please! Why are you saying these horrible things?"

"Because, unfortunately, you are something I can no longer afford to keep around. You have been an excellent symbol for a long time, but now your pleasures have ceased to be Olympian. Yours is a lapse into the mundane. You show that the gods are less sophisticated than schoolchildren—that they can be victimized by biology, despite the oceans of medical allies at our command. Princess, in the eyes of the world you are my daughter, for I am the Set. So take some motherly advice and retire. Do not attempt to renew your option. Get married first, and then to sleep for a few months—till spring, when your option is up. Seep intermittenly in the bunker, so that a year or so will pass. We'll play up the romantic aspect of your retirement. Wait a year or two to bear your child. The cold sleep won't do her any harm; there have been other cases such as yours. If you fail to agree to this, our motherly admonition is that you face present expulsion."

"You *can't!*"

"Read your contract."

"But no one need ever know!"

"You silly little dollface!" The

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acetylene blazed forth. "Your glimpses of the outside have been fragmentary and extremely selective—for at least sixty years. Every news medium in the world watches almost every move every Setman makes, from the time he sits up in his bunker until he retires, exhausted, after the latest Party. Snoopers and newshounds today have more gimmicks and gadgets in their arsenals than your head has colorful hairs. We *can't* hide your daughter all her life, so we won't even try. We'd have trouble enough concealing matters if you decided not to have her—but I think we could outbribe and out-drug our own employees.

"Therefore, I call upon you for a decision."

"I am sorry."

"So am I," said the Doyenne.

The girl stood.

From somewhere, as she left, she seemed to hear the whimpering of a china dog.

BEYOND the neat hedgerows of the garden and down a purposefully irregular slope ran the unpaved pathway which wandered, like an impulsive river, through neck-tickling straits of unkempt forsythia, past high islands of mobbed sumac, and by the shivering branches, like waves, of an occasional ginkgo, wagging at the overhead gulls, while dreaming of the high-flying Archaeopteryx about to break through its heart in a dive; and perhaps a thousand feet of twistings are required to negotiate the two hundred feet of planned wilderness that separates the gardens of the Hall of Sleep from the artificial ruins which occupy a full, hilly acre, dotted here and there by incipient jungles of lilac and the occasional bell of a great willow—which momentarily conceal, and then guide the eye on toward broken pediments, smashed friezes, half-standing columns, then faceless, handless statues, and finally, seemingly random heaps of rubble which lay amid these things; here, the path over which they moved then forms a delta and promptly loses itself where the tides of Time chafe away the memento mori quality that the ruins first seem to spell, acting as a temporal entasis in the eye of the beholding Setman, so that he can look upon it all and say, "I am older than this," and his companion can reply, "We will pass again some year and this too, will be gone" (even though she did not say it this time), feeling happier by feeling the less mortal by so doing; and crossing through the rubble, as they did, to a place where barbarously ruined Pan grins from inside the ring of a dry fountain, a new path is to be located, an unplanned way, where the grass is yellowed un-

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derfoot and the walkers must go single file because it leads them through a place of briars, until they reach the old breakwall over which they generally climb like commandos in order to gain access to a quarter mile strand of coved and deserted beach, where the sand is not quite so clean as the beaches of the town—which are generally sifted every third day—but where the shade is as intense, in its own way, as the sunlight, and there are flat rocks offshore for meditation.

"You're getting lazy," he commented, kicking off his shoes and digging his toes into the cool sand. "You didn't climb over."

"I'm getting lazy," she agreed.

They threw off their robes and walked to the water's edge.

"Don't push!"

"Come on. I'll race you to the rocks."

For once he won.

Loafing in the lap of the Atlantic, they could have been any two bathers in any place, in any time.

"I could stay here forever."

"It gets cold nights, and if there's a bad storm you might catch something or get washed away."

"I meant," she amended, "if it could always be like this."

"*'Verweile doch, du bist so schön,'*" he reminded. "Faust lost a bet that way, remember? So would a Sleeper. Unger's got me reading again— Hey! What's the matter?"

"Nothing!"

"There's something wrong, little girl. Even I can tell."

"So what if there is?"

"So a lot, that's what. Tell me."

HER hand bridged the narrow channel between their rocks and found his. He rolled onto his side and stared at her satin-wet hair and her stuck-together eyelashes, the dimpled deserts of her cheeks, and the bloodied oasis of her mouth. She squeezed his hand.

"Let's stay here forever—despite the chill, and being washed away."

"You are indicating that—?"

"We could get off at this stop."

"I suppose. But—"

"But you like it now? You like the big charade?"

He looked away.

"I think you were right," she told him, "that night—many years ago."

"What night?"

"The night you said it was all a joke—that we are the last people alive on Earth, performing before machines operated by inhuman creatures who watch us for incomprehensible purposes. What are we but wave-patterns on an oscilloscope? I'm sick of being an object of contemplation!"

He stared into the sea.

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"I'm rather fond of the Set now," he finally responded. "At first I was ambivalent toward it. But a few weeks—years—ago I visited a place where I used to work. It was—different. Bigger. Better run. But more than that, actually. It wasn't just that it was filled with things I couldn't have guessed at fifty or sixty years ago. I had an odd feeling while I was there. I was with a little chatterbox of a Processing Director named Teng, and he was yammering away worse than Unger, and I was just staring at all those tandem-tanks and tiers of machinery that had grown up inside the shell of that first old building—sort of like inside a womb—and I suddenly felt that someday something was going to be born, born of steel and plastic and dancing electrons, in such a stainless, sunless place—and *that* something would be so fine that I would want to be there to see it. I couldn't dignify it by calling it a mystical experience or anything like that. It was just sort of a feeling I had. But if *that* moment could stay forever . . . Anyhow, the Set is my ticket to a performance I'd like to see."

"Darling," she began, "it is anticipation and recollection that fill the heart—never the sensation of the moment."

"Perhaps you are right . . ."

His grip tightened on her hand as the tunnel between their eyes shortened. He leaned across the water and kissed the blood from her mouth.

"Verweile doch . . ."

". . . Du bist so schö."

IT was the Party to end all Parties. The surprise announcement of Alvin Moore and Leota Mathilde Mason struck the Christmas Eve gathering of the Set as just the thing for the season. After an extensive dinner and the exchange of bright and costly trifles the lights were dimmed. The giant Christmas tree atop the transparent penthouse blazed like a compressed galaxy through the droplets of melted snow on the ceilingpane.

It was nine by all the clocks of London.

"Married on Christmas, divorced on Twelfth Night," said someone in the darkness.

"What'll they do for an encore?" whispered someone else.

There were giggles and several off-key carols followed them. The blacklight pickup was doubtless in action.

"Tonight we are quaint," said Moore.

"We danced in Davy Jones' Locker," answered Leota, "while they cringed and were sick on the floor."

"It's not the same Set," he told her, "not really. How many new faces have you counted? How many old ones have vanished?

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It's hard to tell. Where do old Setmen go?"

"The graveyard of the elephants?" she suggested. "Who knows?"

" 'The heart is a graveyard
of crigas,' " recited Moore,
" 'hid far from the hunter's
eye,
where love wears death like
enamel
and dogs crawl in to die.' "

"That's Unger's, isn't it?" she asked.

"That's right, I just happened to recall it."

"I wish you hadn't. I don't like it."

"Sorry."

"Where is Unger anyway?" she asked as the darkness retreated and the people arose.

"Probably at the punchbowl—or under the table."

"Not this early in the evening—for being under the table, I mean."

Moore shifted.

"What *are* we doing here anyhow?" he wanted to know. "Why did we have to attend this Party."

"Because it is the season of charity."

"Faith and hope, too," he smirked. "You want to be maudlin or something? All right, I'll be maudlin with you. It *is* a pleasure, really."

He raised her hand to his lips.

"Stop that!"

"All right." He dropped it.

He kissed her on the mouth. There was laughter.

She flushed but did not rise from his side.

"If you want to make a fool of me—of us," he said, "I'll go more than halfway. Tell me why we had to come to this Party and announce our un-Setness before everyone? We could have just faded away from the Parties, slept until spring, and let our options run out."

"No. I am a woman and I could not resist another Party—the last one of the year, the very last—and wear your gift on my finger and know that deep down inside, the others *do* envy us—our courage, if nothing else—and probably our happiness."

"Okay," he agreed, "I'll drink to it—to you, anyway." He raised his glass and downed it. There was no fireplace to throw it into, so as much as he admired the gesture he placed it back on the table.

"Shall we dance? I hear music."

"Not yet. Let's just sit here and drink."

"Fine."

WHEN all the clocks in London said eleven, Leota wanted to know where Unger was.

"He left," a slim girl with purple hair told her, "right after dinner. Maybe indigestion," she

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shrugged, "or maybe he went looking for the Globe."

She frowned and took another drink.

Then they danced. Moore did not really see the room through which they moved, nor the other dancers. They were all the featureless characters in a book he had already closed. Only the dance was real—and the woman with whom he was dancing.

Time's friction, he decided, and a raising of the sights. I have what I wanted and still I want more. I'll get over it.

It was a vast hall of mirrors. There were hundreds of Alvin Moores and Leotas (nee Mason) dancing. They were dancing at all their Parties of the past seventy-some years—from a Tibetan ski lodge to Davy Jones' Locker, from a New Year's Eve in orbit to the floating Palace of Kanayasha, from a Halloween in the caverns of Carlsbad to a Mayday at Delphi—they had danced everywhere, and tonight was the last Party, *good night, ladies* . . .

She leaned against him and said nothing and her breath collared his neck.

"Good night, good night, good night," he heard himself saying, and they left with the bells of midnight, early, early, and it was Christmas as they entered the hopcar and told the Set chauffeur that they were returning early.

And they passed over the stratocruiser and settled beside the Dart they had come in, and they crossed through the powdery fleece that lay on the ground and entered the smaller craft.

"Do you wish to have the lights dimmed? Or would you prefer to have them brighter?" asked a voice at their side, after London and its clocks and its Bridges had fallen, down.

"Dim them."

"Would you care for something to eat? Or something to drink?"

"No."

"No."

"Shall I read you an article on the subject of your choice?" *Pause.* "Or fiction?" *Pause.* "Or poetry?" *Pause.* "Would you care to view the catalog?" *Pause.* "Or perhaps you would prefer music?"

"Music," she said. "Soft. Not the kind you listen to."

After about ten minutes of near-sleep, Moore heard the voice:

"Hilted of flame,
our frail phylactic blade
slits black
beneath Polestar's
pinprick comment,
foredging burrs
of mitigated hell,
spilling light without illumination.

Strands of song,
to share its stinging flight,
are shucked and scraped

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to fit an idiot theme.

Here, through outlocked chaos,
climbed of migrant logic,
the forms of black notation
Blackly dice a flame."

"Turn it off," said Moore. "We didn't ask you to read."

"I'm not reading," said the voice, "I'm composing."

"Who—?"

MOORE came awake and turned in his seat, which promptly adjusted to the movement. A pair of feet projected over the arm of a double seat to the rear.

"Unger?"

"No, Santa Claus. Ho! Ho!"

"What are you doing going back this early?"

"You just answered your own question, didn't you?"

Moore snorted and settled back once more. At his side, Leota was snoring delicately, her seat collapsed into a couch.

He shut his eyes, but knowing they were not alone he could not regain the peaceful drifting sensation he had formerly achieved. He heard a sigh and the approach of lurching footfalls. He kept his eyes closed, hoping Unger would fall over and go to sleep. He didn't.

Abruptly, his voice rang out, a magnificently dreadful baritone:

"I was down to Saint James' Infir-r-rmary," he sang. "I saw my ba-a-aby there, stretched out on a long whi-i-ite ta-a-ble—so sweet, so cold, so fair—"

Moore swung his left hand, cross-body, at the poet's midsection. He had plenty of target, but he was too slow. Unger blocked his fist and backed away, laughing.

Leota shook herself awake.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Composing," he answered, "myself."

"Merry Christmas," he added.

"Go to hell," answered Moore.

"I congratulate you on your recent nuptials, mister Moore."

"Thanks."

"Why wasn't I invited?"

"It was a simple ceremony."

He turned.

"Is that true, Leota? An old comrade in arms like me, not invited just because it wasn't showy enough for my elaborate tastes?"

She nodded, fully awake now.

He struck his forehead.

"Oh, I am wounded!"

"Why don't you go back to wherever you came from?" asked Moore. "The drinks are on the house."

"I can't attend midnight mass in an inebriated condition."

Moore's fingers twitched back into fists.

"You may attend a mass for the dead without having to kneel."

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"I believe you are hinting that you wish to be alone. I understand."

He withdrew to the rear of the Dart. After a time he began to snore.

"I hope we never see him again," she said.

"Why? He's a harmless drunk."

"No, he isn't. He hates us—because we're happy and he isn't."

"I think he's happiest when he's unhappy," smiled Moore, "and whenever the temperature drops. He loves the cold-bunk because it's like a little death to sleep in it. He once said, 'Each Setman dies many deaths. That's what I like about being a Setman.'

"You say more sleep won't be injurious—" he asked abruptly.

"No, there's no risk."

BELOW them, Time fled backward through the cold. Christmas was pushed out into the hallway and over the threshold of the front door to their world—Alvin's, Leota's, and Unger's world—to stand shivering on the doorsill of its own Eve, in Bermuda. Inside the Dart, passing backward through Time, Moore recalled that New Year's Eve Party many years ago, recalled his desires of that day and reflected that they sat beside him now; recalled the Parties since then and reflected that he would miss all that were yet to come; recalled his work in the time before Time—a few months ago—and reflected that he could no longer do it properly—and that Time was indeed out of joint and that *he* could not set it aright; he recalled his old apartment, never revisited, all his old friends, including Diane Demetrios, now dead or senile, and reflected that, beyond the Set which he was leaving, he knew no one, save possibly the girl at his side. Only Wayne Unger was ageless, for he was an employee of the eternal. Given a month or two Unger could open a bar, form his own circle of outcasts and toy with a private renaissance, if he should ever decide to leave.

Moore suddenly felt very stale and tired, and he whispered to their ghostly servant for a martini and reached across his dozing wife to fetch it from the cubicle. He sat there sipping it, wondering about the world below.

He should have kept with life, he decided. He knew nothing of contemporary politics, or law, or art; his standards were those grafted on by the Set, and concerned primarily with color, movement, gaiety, and clever speech; he was reduced again to childhood when it came to science. He knew he was wealthy, but the Set had been managing all his finances. All he had was an all-purpose card, good anywhere

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in the world for any sort of purchase, commodity or service-wise. Periodically, he had examined his file and seen balance sheets which told him he need never worry about being short of money. But he did not feel confident or competent when it came to meeting the people who resided in the world outside. Perhaps he would appear stodgy, old-fashioned, and "quaint" as he had felt tonight, without the glamor of the Set to mask his humanity.

Unger snored, Leota breathed deeply, and the world turned. When they reached Bermuda they returned to the Earth.

They stood beside the Dart, just outside the flight terminal.

"Care to take a walk?" asked Moore.

"I am tired, my love," said Leota, starting in the direction of the Hall of Sleep. She looked back.

He shook his head. "I'm not quite ready."

She returned to him. He kissed her.

"I'll see you then in April, darling. Good night."

"April is the cruelest month," observed Unger. "Come, engineer. I'll walk with you as far as the shuttle stands."

THEY began walking. They moved across the roadway in the direction opposite the terminal, and they entered upon the broad, canopied walk that led to the ro-car garage.

It was a crystalline night, with stars like tinsel and a satellite beacon blazing like a gold piece deep within the pool of the sky. As they walked, their breath fumed into white wreathes that vanished before they were fully formed. Moore tried in vain to light his pipe. Finally, he stopped and hunched his shoulders against the wind until he got it going.

"A good night for walking," said Unger.

Moore grunted. A gust of wind lashed a fiery rain of loose tabacco upon his cheek. He smoked on, hands in the pockets of his jacket collar raised. The poet clapped him on the shoulder.

"Come with me into the town," he suggested. "It's only over the hill. We can walk it."

"No," said Moore, through his teeth.

They strode on, and as they neared the garage Unger grew uneasy.

"I'd rather someone were with me tonight," he said abruptly. "I feel strange, as though I'd drunk the draught of the centuries and suddenly am wise in a time when wisdom is unnecessary. I—I'm afraid."

Moore hesitated.

"No," he finally repeated, "it's time to say good-bye. You're trav-

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eling on and we're getting off. Have fun."

Neither offered to shake hands, and Moore watched him move into the shuttle stop.

Continuing behind the building, Moore cut diagonally across the wide lawns and into the garden. He strolled aimlessly for a few minutes, then found the path that led down to the ruins.

The going was slow as he wound his way through the cold wilderness. After a period of near-panic when he felt surrounded by trees and had had to backtrack, he emerged into the starlit clearing where menaces of shrubbery dappled the broken buildings with patterns of darkness, moving restlessly as the winds shifted.

The grass rustled about his ankles as he seated himself on a fallen pillar and got his pipe going once more.

He sat thinking himself into marble as his toes grew numb, and he felt very much a part of the place; an artificial scene, a ruin transplanted out of history onto unfamiliar grounds. He did not want to move. He just wanted to freeze into the landscape and become his own monument. He sat there making pacts with imaginary devils: he wanted to go back, to return with Leota to his Frisco tower, to work again. Like Unger, he suddenly felt wise in a time when wisdom was unnecessary. Knowledge was what he needed. Fear was what he had.

PUSHED on by the wind, he picked his way across the plain. Within the circle of his fountain, Pan was either dead or sleeping. Perhaps it is the cold sleep of the gods, decided Moore, and Pan will one day awaken and blow upon his festival pipes and only the wind among high towers will answer, and the shuffling tread of an assessment robot be quickened to scan him—because the Party people will have forgotten the festival melodies, and the waxen ones will have isolated out the wisdom of the blood on their colored slides and inoculated mankind against it—and, programmed against emotions, a frivolity machine will perpetually generate the sensations of gaiety into the fever-dreams of the delirious, so that they will not recognize his tunes—and there shall be none among the children of Phoebus to even repeat the Attic cry of his first passing, heard those many Christmases ago beyond the waters of the Mediterranean.

Moore wished that he had stayed a little longer with Unger, because he now felt that he had gained a glimpse of the man's perspective. It had taken the fear of a new world to generate these feelings, but he was beginning to understand the poet. Why did

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the man stay on in the Set, though? he wondered. Did he take a masochistic pleasure in seeing his ice-prophecies fulfilled, as he moved further and further away from his own times? Maybe that was it.

Moore stirred himself into one last pilgrimage. He walked along their old path down to the break-wall. The stones were cold beneath his fingers, so he used the stile to cross over to the beach.

He stood on a rim of rust at the star-reflecting bucket-bottom of the world. He stared out at the black humps of the rocks where they had held their sunny colloquy days/months ago. It was his machines he had spoken of then, before they had spoken of themselves. He had believed, still believed, in their inevitable fusion with the spirit of this kind, into greater and finer vessels for life. Now he feared, like Unger, that by the time this occurred something else might have been lost, and that the fine new vessels would only be partly filled, lacking some essential ingredient. He hoped Unger was wrong; he felt that the ups and downs of Time might at some future equinox restore all those drowsing verities of the soul's undersides that he was now feeling—and that there *would* be ears to hear the piped melody, and feet that would move with its sound. He tried to believe this.

A star fell, and Moore looked at his watch. It was late. He scuffed his way back to the wall and crossed over it again.

INSIDE the pre-sleep clinic he met Jameson, who was already yawning from his prep-injection. Jameson was a tall, thin man with the hair of a cherub and the eyes of its opposite number.

"Moore," he grinned, watching him hang his jacket on the wall and roll up his sleeve, "you going to spend your honeymoon on ice?"

The hypogun sighed in the medic's husky hand and the prep-injection entered Moore's arm.

"That's right," he replied, levelling his gaze at the not completely sober Jameson. "Why?"

"It just doesn't seem the thing to do," Jameson explained, still grinning. "If I were married to Leota you wouldn't catch me going on ice. Unless—"

Moore took one step toward him, the sound in his throat like a snarl. Jameson drew back, his dark eyes widening.

"I was joking!" he said. "I didn't . . ."

There was a pain in Moore's injected arm as the big medic seized it and jerked him to a halt.

"Yeah," said Moore, "good night. Sleep tight, wake sober."

As he turned toward the door

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the medic released his arm. Moore rolled down his sleeve and donned his jacket as he left the room.

"You're off your rocker," Jameson called after him.

Moore had about half an hour before he had to hit his bunker. He did not feel like heading for it at the moment. He had planned on waiting in the clinic until the injection began to work, but Jameson's presence changed that for him.

He walked through the wide corridors of the Hall of Sleep, rode a lift up to the bunkers, then strode down the hallway until he came to his door. He hesitated, then passed on. He would sleep there for the next three and a half months; he did not feel like giving it half of the next hour also.

He refilled his pipe. He would smoke through a sentinel watch beside the ice goddess, his wife. He looked about for wandering medics. One is supposed to refrain from smoking after the prep-injection, but it had never bothered him yet, or anyone else he knew of.

An intermittent thumping sound reached his ears as he moved on up the hallway. It stopped as he rounded a corner, then began again, louder. It was coming from up ahead.

After a moment there was another silence.

HE passed outside Leota's door. Grinning around his pipe, he found a pen and drew a line through the last name on her plate. He printed "Moore" in above it. As he was forming the final letter the pounding began again.

It was coming from inside her room.

He opened the door, took a step, then stopped.

The man had his back to him. His right arm was raised. A mallet was clenched in his fist.

His panted mutterings, like an incantation, reached Moore's ears:

" 'Strew on her roses, roses, and never a spray of yew . . . In quiet she reposes—' "

Moore was across the chamber. He seized the mallet and managed to twist it away. Then he felt something break inside his hand as his fist connected with a jaw. The man collided with the opposite wall, then pitched forward onto the floor.

"Leota!" said Moore.

Cast of white Parian she lay, deep within the coils of the bunker. The canopy had been raised high overhead. Her flesh was already firm as stone—because there was no blood on her breast where the stake had been driven in. Only cracks and fissures, as in stone.

A garland of mistletoe at her throat . . .

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"No," said Moore, in anguish.

The stake was a very hard synthowood—like cocobolo, or quebracho, or perhaps lignum vitae—still to be unsplintered . . .

"No," said Moore.

Her face had the relaxed expression of a dreamer, her hair was the color of aluminum. His ring was on her finger . . .

There was a murmurring in the corner of the room.

"Unger," he said flatly, "why—did—you—do it?"

The man sucked air around his words. His eyes were focussed on something nameless.

". . . Vampire," he muttered, "luring men aboard her Flying Dutchman to drain them across the years . . . She is the future—a goddess on the outside and a thirsting vacuum within," he stated without emotion. " 'Stew on her roses, roses . . . Her mirth the world required—She bathed it in smiles of glee . . .' She was going to leave me way up here in the middle of the air. I can't get off the merry-go-round and I can't have the brass ring. But no one else will lose as I have lost, not now. '. . . Her life was turning, turning, in mazes of heat and sound—' I thought she would come back to me, after she'd tired of you."

He raised his hand to cover his eyes as Moore advanced.

"To the technician, the future—"

Moore hit him with the hammer, once, twice. After the third blow he lost count because his mind could not conceive of any number greater than three.

Then he was walking, running, the mallet still clutched in his hand—past doors like blind eyes, up corridors, down seldom-used stairwells.

As he lurched away from the Hall of Sleep he heard someone calling after him through the night. He kept running.

After a long while he began to walk again. His hand was aching and his breath burned within his lungs. He climbed a hill, paused at its top, then descended.

Party Town, an expensive resort—owned and sponsored, though seldom patronized by the Set—was deserted, except for the Christmas lights in the windows, and the tinsel, and the boughs of holly. From some dim adytum the recorded carols of a private celebration could be heard, and some laughter. These things made Moore feel even more alone as he walked up one street and down another, his body seeming ever more a thing apart from him as the prep-injection took its inevitable effect. His feet were leaden. His eyes kept closing and he kept forcing them back open.

There were no services going on when he entered the church. It was warmer inside. He was alone there, too.

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The interior of the church was dim, and he was attracted to an array of lights about the display at the foot of a statue. It was a manger scene. He leaned back against a pew and stared at the mother and the child, at the angels and the inquisitive cattle, at the father. Then he made a sound he had no words for and threw the mallet into the little stable and turned away. Clawing at the wall, he staggered off a dozen steps and collapsed, cursing and weeping, until he slept.

They found him at the foot of the cross.

JUSTICE had become a thing of streamlined swiftness since the days of Moore's boyhood. The sheer force of world population had long ago crowded every docket of every court to impossible extremes, until measures were taken to waive as much of the paraphernalia as could be waived and hold court around the clock. That was why Moore faced judgment at ten o'clock in the evening, two days after Christmas.

The trial lasted less than a quarter of an hour. Moore waived representation, the charges were read, he entered a plea of guilty, and the judge sentenced him to death in the gas chamber without looking up from the stack of papers on his bench.

Numbly, Moore left the courtroom and was returned to a cell for his final meal, which he did not remember eating. He had no conception of the juridical process in this year in which he had come to rest. The Set attorney had simply looked bored as he told him his story, then mentioned "symbolic penalties" and told him to waive representation and enter a simple plea of "guilty to the homicide as described". He signed a statement to that effect. Then the attorney had left him and Moore had not spoken with anyone but his warders up until the time of the trial, and then only a few words before he went into court. And now—to receive a death sentence after he had admitted he was guilty—guilty of killing his wife's murderer—he could not conceive that justice had been done. Despite this, he felt an unnatural calm as he chewed mechanically upon whatever he had ordered. He was not afraid to die. He could not believe in it.

An hour later they came for him. He was led to a small, airtight room with a single, thick window set high in its metal door. He seated himself upon the bench within it and his gray-uniformed guards slammed the door behind him.

After an interminable time he heard the pellets breaking and he smelled the fumes. They grew stronger.

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Finally, he was coughing and breathing fire and gasping and crying out, and he thought of her lying there in her bunker, the ironic strains of Unger's song during their Dart-flight recurring in his mind:

"I was down to Saint James'
Infir-r-rmary.
I saw my ba-a-aby there,
Stretched out on a long
whi-i-ite ta-a-able—
So sweet, so cold, so fair . . ."

Had Unger been consciously contemplating her murder even then? he wondered. Or was it something lurking below his consciousness? Something he had felt stirring, so that he had wanted Moore to stay with him—to keep it from happening?

He would never know, he realized, as the fires reached into his skull and consumed his brain.

AS he awoke, feeling very weak upon white linen, the voice within his earphones was saying to Alvin Moore: ". . . Let that be a lesson to you."

Moore tore off the earphones with what he thought was a strong gesture, but his muscles responded weakly. Still, the earphones came off.

He opened his eyes and stared.

He might be in the Set's Sick Ward, or in hell. Franz Andrews, the attorney who had advised him to plead guilty, sat at his bedside.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Oh, great! Care to play a set of tennis?"

The man smiled faintly.

"You have successfully discharged your debt to society," he stated, "through the symbolic penalty procedure."

"Oh, that explains everything," said Moore wryly. Finally: "I don't see why there had to be any penalty, symbolic or otherwise. That rhymer murdered my wife."

"He'll pay for it," said Andrews.

Moore rolled onto his side and studied the dispassionate, flat-featured face at his elbow. The attorney's short hair was somewhere between blond and gray and his gaze unflinchingly sober.

"Do you mind repeating what you just said?"

"Not at all. I said he'd pay for it."

"He's not dead!"

"No, he's quite alive—two floors above us. His head has to heal before he can stand trial. He's too ill to face execution."

"He's alive!" said Moore. "Alive? Then what the hell was *I* executed for?"

Well, you *did* kill the man," said Andrews, somewhat annoyed. "The fact that the doctors were later able to revive him does not alter the fact that a homicide occurred. The symbolic penalty exists for all such cases. You'll

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think twice before ever doing it again."

Moore tried to rise. He failed.

"Take it easy. You're going to need several more days of rest before you can get up. Your own revival was only last night."

Moore chuckled weakly. Then he laughed for a long, long time. He stopped, ending with a little sob.

"Feel better now?"

"Sure, sure," he whispered hoarsely. "Like a million bucks, or whatever the crazy currency is these days. What kind of execution will Unger get for murder?"

"Gas," said the attorney, "the same as you, if the alleged—"

"Symbolic, or for keeps?"

"Symbolic, of course."

MOORE did not remember what happened next, except that he heard someone screaming and there was suddenly a medic whom he had not noticed doing something to his arm. He heard the soft hiss of an injection. Then he slept.

When he awakened he felt stronger and he noticed an insolent bar of sunlight streaking the wall opposite him. Andrews appeared not to have moved from his side.

He stared at the man and said nothing.

"I have been advised," said the attorney, "of your lack of knowledge concerning the present state of the law in these matters. I did not stop to consider the length of your membership in the Set. These things so seldom occur—in fact, this is the first such case I've ever handled—that I simply assumed you knew what a symbolic penalty was when I spoke with you back in your cell. I apologize."

Moore nodded.

"Also," he continued, "I assumed that you had considered the circumstances under which mister Unger allegedly committed a homicide—"

"'Allegedly' hell! I was there. He drove a stake through her heart!" Moore's voice broke at that point.

"It *was* to have been a precedent-making decision," said Andrews, "as to whether he was to be indicted now for attempted homicide, or be detained until after the operation and face homicide charges if things do not go well. The matter of his detention then would have raised many more problems—which were fortunately resolved at his own suggestion. After his recovery he will retire to his bunker and remain there until the nature of the offense has been properly determined. He has volunteered to do this of his own free will, so no legal decision was delivered on the matter. His trial is postponed, therefore, until some of

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the surgical techniques have been refined—"

"What surgical techniques?" asked Moore, raising himself into a seated position and leaning against the headboard. His mind was fully alert for the first time since Christmas. He felt what was coming next.

"Those required by your wife's present condition."

He said one word.

"Explain."

Andrews shifted in his chair.

"Mister Unger," he began, "had a poets conception as to the exact location of the human heart. He did not pierce it centrally, although the accidental angling of the stake did cause it to pass through the left ventricle.—That can be repaired easily enough, according to the medics.

"Unfortunately, however, the slanting of the shaft caused it to strike against her spinal column," he said, "smashing two vertebrae and cracking several others. It appears that the spinal cord was severed . . ."

Moore was numb again, numb with the realization that had dawned as the lawyer's words were filling the air between them. Of course she wasn't dead. Neither was she alive. She was sleeping the cold sleep. The spark of life would remain within her until the arousal began. *Then*, and only then, could she die. Unless—

". . . Complicated by her pregnancy and the period of time necessary to raise her body temperature to an operable one," Andrews was saying.

"When are they going to operate?" Moore broke in.

"They can't say for certain, at this time," answered Andrews. "It will have to be a specially designed operation, as it raises problems for which there are answers in theory but not in practice. Any one of the factors could be treated at present, but the others couldn't be held in abeyance while the surgery is going on. Together, they are rather formidable—to repair the heart and fix the back, and to save the child, all at the same time, will require some new instrumentation and some new techniques."

"How long?" insisted Moore.

Andrews shrugged.

"They can't say. Months, years. She's all right as she is now, but—"

Moore asked him to go away, rather loudly, and he did.

THE following day, feeling dizzy, he got to his feet and refused to return to bed until he could see Unger.

"He's in custody," said the medic who attended him.

"No he isn't," replied Moore. "You're not a lawyer, and I've already spoken with one. He won't

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be taken into legal custody until after he awakens from his next cold sleep—whenever that is."

It took over an hour for him to get permission to visit Unger. Then he was accompanied by Andrews and two orderlies.

"Don't you trust the symbolic penalty?" he smirked at Andrews. "You know that I'm supposed to think twice before I do it again."

Andrews looked away and did not answer him.

"Anyhow, I'm too weak and I don't have a hammer handy."

They knocked and entered.

Unger, his head turbanned in white, sat propped up by pillows. A closed book lay on the counterpane. He had been staring out of the window and into the garden. He turned his head toward them.

"Good morning, you son of a —" observed Moore.

"Please," Unger interrupted.

Moore did not know what to say next. He had already expressed all that he felt. So he headed for the chair beside the bed and sat on it. He fished his pipe from the pocket of his robe and fumbled with it to hide his discomfort. Then he realized he had no tobacco with him. Neither Andrews nor the orderlies appeared to be watching them.

He placed the dry pipe between his teeth and looked up.

"I'm sorry," said Unger. "Can you believe that?"

"No, I can't," answered Moore.

"She's the future and she's yours," said Unger. "I drove a stake through her heart but she isn't really dead. They say they're working on the operating machines now. The doctors will fix up everything that I did, as good as new." He winced and looked down at the bedclothes.

"If it's any consolation to you," he continued, "I'm suffering and I'll suffer more. There is no Senta to save this Dutchman. I'm going to ride it out with the Set, or without it, in a bunker—die in some foreign place among strangers." He looked up, regarding Moore with a weak smile. Moore stared him back down. "They'll save her!" he insisted. "She'll sleep until they're absolutely certain of the technique. Then you two will get off together and I'll keep on going. You'll never see me after that. I wish you happiness. I won't ask" your forgiveness."

Moore got to his feet.

"We've got nothing left to say. We'll talk again some year, in a day or so."

He left the room wondering what else he could have said.

AN ethical question has been put before the Set—that is to say, myself," said Mary Maude. "Unfortunately, it was posed by government attornies, so it cannot be treated as most

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ethical questions are to be treated. It requires an answer."

"Involving Moore and Unger?" asked Andrews.

"Not directly. Involving the entire Set, as a result of their escapade."

She indicated the fac-sheet on her desk. Andrews nodded.

" 'Unto Us a Babe is Born,' " she read, considering the photo of the prostrate Setman in the church. "A front-page editorial in this periodical has accused us of creating all varieties of neurotics—from necrophilists on down the line. Then there's that other photo—we still don't know who took it—here, on page three—"

"I've seen it."

"They now want assurances that ex-Setmen will remain frivolous and not turn into eminent undesirables."

"This is the first time it's ever happened—like this."

"Of course," she smiled, "they're usually decent enough to wait a few weeks before going anti-social—and wealth generally compensates for most normal maladjustments. But, according to the accusations, we are either selecting the wrong people—which is ridiculous—or not mustering them out properly when they leave—which is profoundly ridiculous. First, because I do all the interviewing, and second, because you *can't* boot a person half a century or so into the future and expect him to land on his feet as his normal, cheerful self, regardless of any orientation you may give him. Our people make a good show of it, though, because they don't generally do much of anything.

"But both Moore and Unger were reasonably normal, and they never knew each other particularly well. Both watched a little more closely than most Setmen as their worlds became history, and both were highly sensitive to those changes. Their problem, though, was interpersonal."

Andrews said nothing.

"By that, I mean it was a simple case of jealousy over a woman—an unpredictable human variable. I could not have foreseen their conflict. The changing times have nothing to do with it. Do they?"

Andrews did not answer.

". . . Therefore, there is no problem," she continued. "We are not dumping Kaspar Hausers onto the street. We are simply transplanting wealthy people of good taste a few generations into the future—and they get on well. Our only misstep so far was predicated upon a male antagonism of the mutually accelerating variety, caused by a beautiful woman. That's all. Do you agree?"

"He thought that he was really

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going to die . . ." said Andrews. "I didn't stop to think that he knew nothing of the World Legal Code."

"A minor matter," she dismissed it. "He's still living."

"You should have seen his face when he came to in the Clinic."

"I'm not interested in faces. I've seen too many. Our problem now is to manufacture a problem and then to solve it to the government's satisfaction."

"The world changes so rapidly that I almost need to make a daily adjustment to it myself. These poor—"

"Some things do not change," said Mary Maude, "but I can see what you're driving at. Very clever. We'll hire us an independent Psych Team to do us a study indicating that what the Set needs is more adjustment, and they'll recommend that one day be set aside every year for therapeutic purposes. We'll hold each one in a different part of the world—at a non-Party locale. Lots of cities have been screaming for concessions. They'll all be days spent doing simple, adjustive things, mingling with un-Set people. Then, in the evening we'll have a light meal, followed by casual, restful entertainment, and then some dancing—dancing's good for the psyche, it relaxes tensions.—I'm sure that will satisfy all parties concerned." She smiled at the last.

"I believe you are right," said Andrews.

"Of course. After the Psych Team writes several thousand pages, you'll draft a few hundred of your own to summarize the findings and cast them into the form of a resolution to be put before the board.

He nodded.

"I thank you for your suggestions."

"Any time. That's what I'm paid for."

After he had left, Mary Maude donned her black glove and placed another log on the fire. Genuine logs cost more and more every year, but she did not trust flameless heaters.

* * *

It was three days before Moore had recovered sufficiently to enter the sleep again. As the prep-injection dulled his senses and his eyes closed, he wondered what alien judgment day would confront him when he awakened. He knew, though, that whatever else the new year brought, his credit would be good.

He slept, and the world passed by.

THE END

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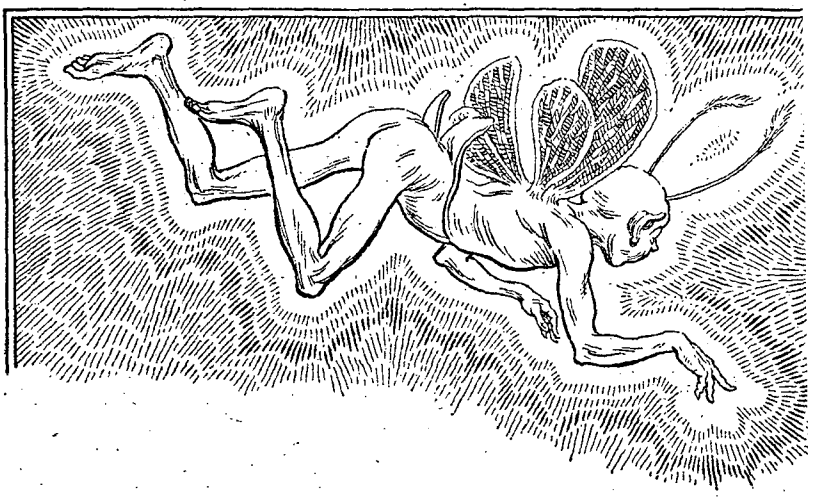

the coming of the little people

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Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

WHEN Fantasy Press issued a distinguished collection of four short science fiction novels by Robert Spencer Carr in 1951, not only reviewers for The New York Times *and* New York Herald Tribune *referred to the author as a "new" acquisition to the fantasy field, but reviewers in the science fiction magazines themselves fell into the same error. Actually, Robert Spencer Carr wrote and sold his first story* Spider Bite *to* WEIRD TALES *magazine when he was but 16 and it appeared in the June, 1926 issue of that magazine.*

He was immediately heralded as a sensational discovery and the story won first place in the issue. Farnsworth Wright, whose penchant for unearthing teen

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age talent (he would print Tennessee Williams first story in his Aug., 1928 issue) rates him closer to "brilliant" than to "able" as an editor, was to get relatively little mileage out of his new discovery. The reasons were described by contemporary E. Hoffmann Price as follows: "Suffice it to say that at the age of seventeen, he had left his home in Ashley, Ohio, with a bag of cookies, the maternal blessing, and a bale of pencilled manuscript, his novel of the high school generation . . . A chubby, round faced, owlish looking kid, Robert S. Carr . . . had come to Chicago to consult Farnsworth on marketing this non-weird story. . . . Farnsworth spent many an hour helping the kid cut and revise the MS. At times, this youngest "vulture" was a trial, but the outcome justified Wright's faith. Months later, "Rampant Age" was published, serially in Smart Set *and then in book form; it was banned in London, it was translated into German, and it got the precocious author a Hollywood contract. . . .*

Carr would never return to the pages of WEIRD TALES. *In the years that followed there would be other prominent books,* The Bells of Saint Ivan's *and* The Room Beyond *among them. Carr would eventually become a member of Walt Disney's staff, the gentle sweetness of his philosophical outlook ideally lending itself to that type of material.*

In The Coming of the Little People *the Disney relationship seems self-evident. It could easily be the working script for a first-rate cartoon. Maxwell Hamilton, editor of* Bluebook *during 1952, the year of its publication, prefaced the story with a* full-page *blurb titled: "A Story to Remember." "In an editor's lifetime of reading and evaluating countless thousands of stories," he started, "perhaps less than half a-dozen, even of those he buys, are so outstanding as to remain in his memory through the years. Such a story, we believe, is "The Coming of the Little People," by Robert Spencer Carr . . . It is our personal conviction that it is one of the finest stories ever published in any magazine."*

ALL that week the feeling grew that something wonderful was going to happen soon. No one seemed to know just what we were expecting, but, before that week was out, millions of Americans had sensed a brighter, lighter spirit in the quickened air of spring.

Some mentioned it. Most did not. There was nothing in the newspapers to make anyone feel optimistic. The world looked like the breaking up of a hard winter,

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which it certainly had been, for everybody. A few women mentioned intuition, asked each other if they'd heard good news. They hadn't. Still the promise in the heart grew stronger every day. A few men laughed at women's intuitions, then went on to say they "had a hunch" that some big deal with Russia was being made behind the scenes, to everybody's imminent and immense relief.

This rumor was indignantly denied by both Governments. So far as either knew what was going on, each spoke the bitter truth. On the surface, official relations had never looked or sounded worse. Yet with the first sincerely sunny days of mild blue skies, retreating snow and advancing green, there sprang up with the early flowers a warm, exciting sense that something more than spring was in the air, this crucial year. The new mood could be felt most strongly out of doors, at night, beneath the myriad twinkling stars.

"Spring fever," people grumbled, trying not to grin. America went on about its business, but not quite as usual. Smiling oftener, and worrying less. People who'd been feeling out of sorts perked up. Wives and nurses and doctors noticed that everyone was sleeping better. "Sharp change in barometric pressure," was the explanation. There had been remarkably little change in barometric pressure for a week—but there *has* to be an explanation. Hearty souls who boast "I never dream" began remembering their dreams, for theirs were now sweet dreams, lifting the forgotten lids on long-lost treasure chests of childhood to find early memories, still beautiful and bright, untarnished by the acid years of disbelief.

All that week the children had been acting strangely, staying outdoors later than they should, whispering together, stopping if adults approached. The younger ones grew very gay and played the new imaginative games they are somehow able to invent when they are happy and excited. The older children began behaving so nicely that their grateful but bewildered parents and teachers thought the season seemed more like the week before Christmas than the last lamb-days of March.

BY March 26th, the lawns were green throughout the Middle West, and Washington was growing worried over grass-roots movements. On the 27th, the Weather Bureau admitted we were having an unusually early spring. Any farmer could have told them that, days before, when brooks began talking in their sleep beneath the ice, when rocks woke up and rolled over on the sunny side of slopes, as the fin-

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gers of the frost let go their undersides as though on orders from below.

All that week was wishing-weather. Courting couples set the date. Weary soldiers dreamed of peace. Worried mothers foresaw their families safe and whole. Disillusioned diplomats revived dead hopes of general disarmament. Anybody with two bits to jingle brightened at an utterly fantastic rumor that all taxes would be cut by fifty-one percent.

"This joyful trend is tragic," mourned Ariel Hotspur, radio's deepest voice of gloom, on the balmy evening of the 28th. Many listened but few heard. Millions were at their open windows watching the rising of the largest blue moon ever seen.

We all remember—how can we forget?—that outbreak of picnics, clam-bakes, wienie-roasts, square dances, and church sociables that enlivened the unusually warm week-end of the 30th and 31st. By Saturday morning, America's wealth of woodlands, State parks and national forests were swamped with eager families loaded down with baskets, blankets, and small children. City folks who had always been "too busy" to visit their country cousins now descended on them bag and baggage, bearing gifts, and wearing stout walking-shoes. All America was talking to the woods, not in fear, but with anticipation.

"For a rational explanation of the public behavior, we must delve deep into the irrational collective unconscious mind of Western man," gasped the popular psychologist, Professor Egbert Muntz. He was still breathless from being dragged in more or less by the seat of his pants by a hysterical radio executive as a last-minute substitute for Ariel Hotspur, who had mysteriously disappeared on his way to the studio. "Quite naturally," Muntz went on, stroking his badly ruffled black beard, "the first warm moonlight nights of spring have a disturbing tendency to awaken, in certain atavistic personalities, dim but haunting racial memories of the sacred rites of spring. Individuals so afflicted may feel an uncontrollable desire to go walking in the park and touch a tree; for these pagan fertility festivals—without which you ladies and gentlemen would not be here tonight—were held outdoors in sacred groves by the light of the silvery moon." He sighed happily. He was feeling rather atavistic himself, for the first time since Vienna. "Furthermore, we must remember that an early spring produces profound biological changes, affecting our state of mind."

"Malarkey!" murmured old Forest Ranger Tim Mahon, at a

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point two thousand miles west of the professor, and three time-zones earlier. He reached behind him through the open window of his pickup truck, turned off the regular radio, but left the short-wave on, in case he got a call from the ranger station, thirty miles away and one mile lower. His round weatherbeaten face, usually beaming with the sunny good nature of the outdoor man, was clouded by a frown. He did not like being done out of his favorite broadcaster, Ariel Hotspur, any better than he liked being sent up here to the high heart of nowhere on a fool's errand, at a time when every forest ranger in America was needed to control the unseasonably early crowds seeking entrance to the parks. Tim had also wanted to be near his wife when the good news came. In the forest where they lived, the sense of imminence was stronger than in the towns. Strident bluejays stopped their scolding. Busy squirrels sat still and waited.

RAISING his powerful binoculars again, the veteran ranger resumed his patient scanning of the wilderness area of Yellowstone National Park. He stood on the brink of a cliff at the remote spot called Lookout Point. Keen winds cut at his wool uniform of forest green. About him lay deep drifts of snow, draped around the mountain shoulders like white shawls tucked into high-waisted gowns of evergreens. From timber-line, a thousand feet below, stretched miles of the great trees Tim loved as any good man loves the living things depending on his care. As ordered, he searched carefully for smoke, straining eyes already bloodshot from lack of sleep. Last night he had come in at 3 A.M. from a hard day of trying to keep pre-season hikers out of closed areas. Tiptoeing into his log cabin, trying not to awaken his wife, he had surprised her kneeling in the moonlight by her bed. He overheard a little of her whispered prayers for peace—peace for the sinners and sinned against, the past to be forgiven and forgotten in a fresh new start for all the world, as a blackboard scribbled full of ugly words can be erased and used again for something better.

He caught her up and kissed her. Then his phone began to ring. It was the dispatcher, ordering him out to investigate a weird report of something an airliner pilot thought he had seen as he flew over in the dark.

Tim Mahon was normally an obedient civil servant, devoted to his job. But for once he talked back to the dispatcher, not only because his wife of many years was all at once a young and beautiful colleen again, with her eyes

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shining in the moonlight, but also because arrant nonsense put his Irish up. "Man alive, it is physically impossible for anyone to build a fire on top of the Devil's Dunce Cap!" he shouted into the phone. "That peak has never been climbed. And furthermore, there's nothing to catch fire up there on the bare rocks above timber-line."

"In times as tense as these," said the dispatcher, darkly, "nothing is impossible, and no tip is too crazy to investigate. This may be a Chinese fire-balloon, or a flying saucer from Siberia."

With a cup of Russian tea on it, maybe, Tim thought angrily. He didn't believe such stuff. Even a Lower Slobovian general should know that this is not fire season in our north woods. Climbing higher for a better view, he found no trace of smoke about the Devil's Dunce Cap, or anywhere else for miles around. Before climbing down to his truck to make his radio report, he took one last look across the wild and rugged region, this time simply for the beauty of it. Noble trees and hidden glens leaped into focus. There were still a few places left where, as the Irishman in the old joke was supposed to have said, "The hand of man has never set foot, begorry!"

The peak they called the Devil's Dunce Cap was one of these. Tim had climbed as close as he could get to it and he was still a mile away, across a gorge. Backlighted by the sinking sun, the pinnacle stood out alone, aloof.

SOMETHING glinted. An icicle, Tim thought, quickly focusing his glasses. The gleam had come from the flat place on top of the peak.

What could be causing the gleam, Tim Mahon could not guess. He stood for a long time looking, gradually stiffening all over as his realization grew that he was seeing something no one on this earth had ever seen before. Maybe it had been up there for years. Maybe it had landed there last night. Wherever it had come from, it had fallen hard. He saw parts of wings, and wheels, and windows. What those other weird contrivances were for, he could not imagine. And then, in the deepening dusk, the forest ranger saw what the airline pilot must have seen. Except that it was not a fire. It was a ball of iridescent light that pulsed like a human heart, though not as fast as Tim's own heart was beating. And as darkness fell he clearly saw in silhouette against the throbbing light a number of small upright figures that moved rapidly around. Watching them, he wondered numbly why the maps

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placed the Devil's Dunce Cap only one mile from Lookout Point. Obviously the peak was much farther away than that. As a fire-watcher, he had used range-finding binoculars long enough to know how large a human being, or even a small child, should look one mile away.

Then the glowing ball dissolved into innumerable tiny sparks, which disappeared. For a time he saw nothing more. Cautiously he crawled down the rocks to the road, and crept into his truck. He turned on his short-wave transmitter, and took out his revolver. He knew he would have to be extremely careful of what he said, not to exaggerate or sound excited. With a name like Tim Mahon and the map of Ireland on his freckled face, certain people smiled a little sooner than they would at some blatherskite professor. Sacred rites of spring, my foot! This was an invasion, of some strange new kind.

Ariel Hotspur sat on an oak stump and gazed at the moon. His round, soft, sensitive body was unharmed, except for blisters on his aching feet. But a change had occurred in his brain. He had not been kidnaped, as his sponsors had feared, and many listeners had hoped. While preparing his script, a witch's brew of ill omens and dire portents, he had suddenly grown ashamed of bringing bad news every night to millions of patient, kind and inherently optimistic Americans. Ariel had decided, like the little rabbit, that if he couldn't say something good, he wouldn't say anything at all. So he had run away, feeling irresponsible and gay for the first time in forty years. He looked rather like a large white rabbit, his delicate pink nose quivering with excitement.

He was only three hundred miles from Broadway, yet the oaks in this grove had no initials carved on them, nor was there any picnic litter on the ground. The spoilers had not yet found this spot. Ariel remembered it from his happy childhood on a stony upstate farm. This grove was his earliest memory. Tonight a force beyond reason had drawn him back to his beginning, like the turning of a wheel.

IN the distance stood a fabled mountain many men had loved, a few had died for, but none had wholly mastered. On its one unclimbed crag, Ariel fancied he saw a throbbing cloud of tiny many-colored lights; but he could not be sure. His eyes were playing tricks on him tonight, he knew.

Idly, it occurred to him that this must be about the hour he usually went on the air. He looked at his watch. It had

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stopped. To get the time, he tuned in a tiny portable he always carried, the ball and chain of his unhappy calling. The pedantic, breathless voice of his pinch-hitter advised, "Keep calm. This is no time for building bonfires on the mountain tops, as some people in New York State and the Carolinas seem to be doing, judging by the news reports just handed to me. Again, we must look into our common heritage of folklore to understand why civilized people under stress will revert to the most primitive peasant superstitions—"

Ariel cut off the voice of reason, and laughed wickedly. How good it felt to be free again! Free to believe in things the authorities said you must not believe in, under pain of losing your job and being questioned by committees. As a news analyst with access to confidential information, he had suspected that some radical change was coming, but had not dared to say so, on or off the air. Now that his own radio program had convinced him that he wasn't seeing things, he did not intend to be left out. He stood up and started hopefully toward the light on the mountain.

At the same moment, in Washington, a thoughtful young Intelligence officer stuck a blue-headed pin into a large wall map of the United States to mark the spot toward which Ariel Hotspur and many less complicated people were now moving, mostly out of curiosity. Spread out across this officer's desk lay seven teletype flashes from seven States. All reported mysterious fires or lights on the highest and most inaccessible mountain peaks from coast to coast. Swiftly searching out the points at which to place his pins, he remembered most of them as virgin peaks. At least they had been, when he had courted them. In his salad days, before the war, the comparatively safe and easy sport of mountain climbing had amused him briefly. He liked sleeping out, with stars for company. Now he looked back on the Jungfrau, Elbruz, and Ararat as mere foothills in the possible adventures of a man.

Under this busy fingers a pattern took shape: The points at which the fires were seen, when all were located by blue-headed pins, formed a perfect replica of the constellation Casiopeia.

He shook his head with annoyance. Merely a coincidence, of course. He disliked coincidence; it was not controllable. He did not like uncontrollable factors, least of all in himself.

This was a younger and slimmer man than broadcaster Ariel Hotspur, a taller and tougher man than ranger Tim Mahon. Temperamentally he was the op-

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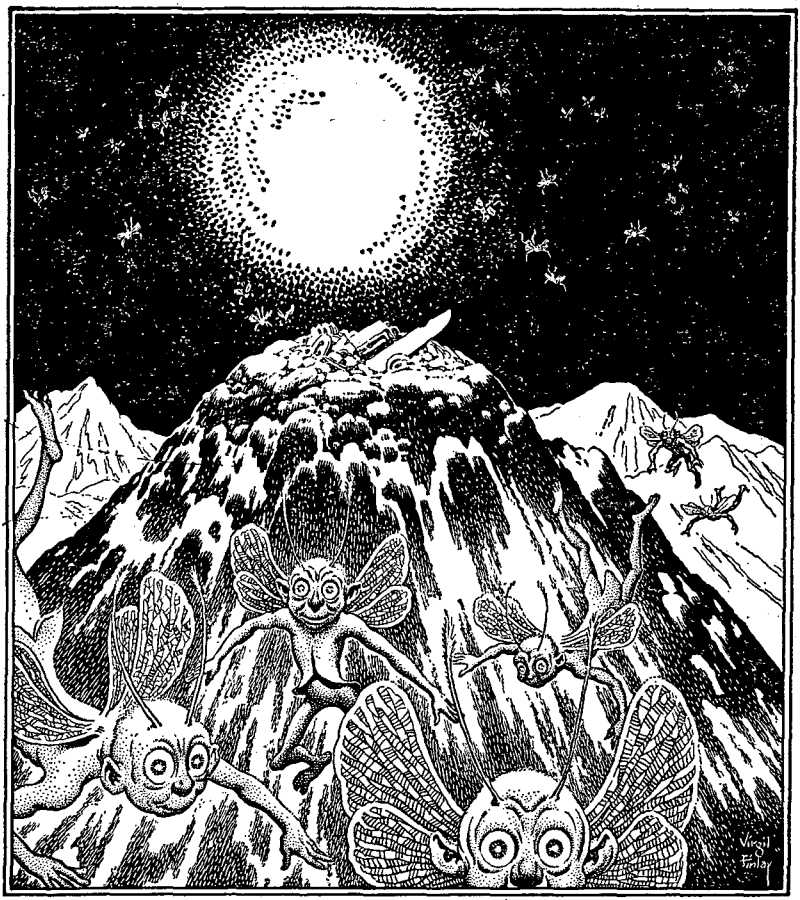

posite of both of them, being intensely realistic by nature and highly analytical by training. His name was Kenneth Clark; his rank, colonel; his serial number he could not remember, offhand, having but recently returned Stateside from five years of detached duty—extremely detached duty, in parts of the world where one does not wear one's dogtags nor remember anything, when questioned. He was now rediscovering America as night duty officer in the teletype room of that central agency to which all needful news, good or bad, public or secret, is relayed from many sources in much the same way that constant streams of

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pleasant or painful sensations from all parts of our body reach our brain.

Behind him he could hear the chattering of the teletype machine, punctuated by the rip of tearing paper, as his sergeant tore the news away in strips. Presently he grew aware that his sergeant stood beside him. Not that he saw her; he was making a grim effort to avoid looking at her. And not that he heard her; on the rubber floor her light, quick footsteps made no sound. Nor had she brushed against him. That might have caused a bolt of lightning to flash between them, with fatal results. He had certainly not tasted her inviting lips, although he had developed a nervous habit of biting his own whenever she stood near him.

THE colonel knew his sergeant was beside him, because a fragrance reached the one sense no man can control. She gave off a crisp fresh scent, like spring. It probably was just soap, he knew. His sergeant would never violate Army Regulations *Re: perfume and cosmetics, the wearing of, by WAC.* Nor certain other very strict A.R.'s—*Re: WAC, enlisted, non-fraternization with commissioned officers, male.* Every move that Sergeant Holly Summers made was strictly by the book. That was what was killing the colonel, a lonely bachelor.

The barrier between them could not have been higher had he been a priest and she a nun, nor could devotion to a common cause have drawn them more closely together, day and night.

Now she stepped around in front of him, trim in her smartly tailored uniform. She wore bright ribbons, as many as the colonel had. She, too, was a career soldier; and to make his heartache worse, that was what he most admired about her.

Standing at attention, she handed him more teletype reports. "All secondaries, sir," she said. "Duplicates and confirmations."

He took them from her, being careful not to touch her fingers. He wondered if she knew how he felt about her. Women were supposed to sense such things about a man, no matter how grossly ineligible he was. She didn't seem to. Her face wore its usual mask, a strictly GI look. On her, even that looked beautiful.

The pain of his personal dilemma, for which no honorable solution has ever been found short of separation from the service, made it a comparative pleasure for him to be compelled to concentrate upon the public welfare. He looked hard at the map, his trained mind working at top speed. Something sinister was casting its shadow across America tonight. One or two reports of

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weird lights in the sky might be explained as meteorites. But here were seven, and they stayed. It was time to lower the boom.

"Sergeant," he said quietly, "get me the Chief, at his home, on the private wire."

"Sir," she said, "the Chief is not at home. Air Intelligence called him over. They've got night fighters up in California. Things reported in the air." The teletype began to gibber. She strode swiftly back to it.

Then maybe this is it, he thought, and felt a tightening around his heart. His knowledge of the enemy was painfully intimate. He knew, from personal observation, that they were capable of anything, and that when they struck the all-out blow, it would be a sneak attack—it always had been, against their neighbors, and against their own people. Deception was not second nature to them, deception was their nature, period. Somewhere in the Himalayas they were working on a secret weapon that required, not physicists but biologists. Something rather nasty, fleeing tribesmen had reported.

The colonel said, "Query all sources for more detailed observations."

"One is coming in now, sir," his sergeant said. Remaining at the clattering machine, she read excerpts from a long message as it printed itself in: "Yellowstone National Park. Forest Ranger Mahon is one mile from a fire point. Reports aircraft wreckage on an unclimbed peak called Devil's Dunce Cap. Sees moving figures. Is keeping them under observation."

"'Them'?" said the colonel, turning slowly.

"'Small living creatures, running upright,' sir." The clatter stopped. She brought him the full report. He read it and said, "Find the Chief." Selecting a red-headed pin, he stabbed it into the northwest corner of Wyoming. He knew the place.

AS though its point had pricked a hidden switch, the door burst open and the Chief blew in. "As you were," he said, before either of them could snap to attention. He went straight to the map and stood studying it in silence. The deep lines in his strong thin face held traces of both smiles and scowls. Then he asked the question that the colonel was expected to be able to answer whenever he was on duty. "What's the over-all?"

"First, this is a co-ordinated action," replied the colonel promptly. "The points reported are all alike: inaccessible mountain peaks. Second, there is no conceivable connection between my pattern of pins here, and the locations of our primary target areas."

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"I can see that myself," said the Chief dryly. "What I want are ideas, Colonel, not a geography lecture. Could these be free-floating fire balloons, blown across the Pacific?"

"No, sir. All made pinpoint landings on barren mountain peaks. One balloon might do that, accidentally, but not seven in a row."

"Why do you say landings? Our night fighters haven't found anything up—except the moon. Personally, I think this is all some kind of bushwa, being managed from the ground. Don't you?"

"No, sir," said the colonel. "You see, there isn't any way to get on top of these particular mountain peaks, except to drop on them. And even that would be—"

"Impossible."

"That's just the trouble. It's all impossible. And yet it's happening."

"Could these things be guided missiles?"

"No, sir. Not unless the missiles were deliberately misguided by pro-Western scientists in the enemy's ranks. A few might be, but not the entire attack, because we haven't enough such friends—yet. Not one has hit where it could damage us, even if all are atomic time-bombs. No explosions have occurred."

The Chief paced up and down before the map, eyeing it quizzically. "If this is war, somebody is starting it the hard way." He stopped in midstep. "What's the red pin for, at Yellowstone?"

COLONEL CLARK handed him Tim Mahon's first report, or what was left of it after a rough trip through channels. The Chief read it and smiled. "Small living creatures running upright could be Camp Fire Girls toasting marshmallows," he said.

"Not on top of that peak, sir."

"Why so positive on such an obscure point, Colonel?"

"Because I once tried to climb the Devil's Dunce Cap myself."

The old general looked thoughtfully at the young colonel, who then experienced a sinking feeling that he should not have mentioned mountain-climbing. "Do you see any possible chemical or bacteriological threat?" the Chief persisted.

"No, sir. Green trees absorb or dissipate and counteract poison gas and germs. Our largest forests surround each point reported. The trees would protect our cities."

The teletype stopped its yammer. Sergeant Summers tore a long sheet off and brought it over to the colonel, brushing blindly against him in a way that she had never done before. Her hands, when she touched his, were cold. He took the report and read it

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quickly. When next he heard the Chief's voice it was raised in impatience: "Are you deaf?"

The colonel came back to his senses unwillingly. "No, sir," he said hoarsely.

"You've been saying 'No, sir' to every possibility I suggest. Now I want *you* to suggest a possibility, Colonel, so that *I* can say 'No, sir.'"

Colonel Clark glanced at Sergeant Summers. The look in her eyes reassured him that his own feeling of horror was not unworthy of a soldier. "Very well, sir," he said, hearing his own voice like an echo in a cave. "On the basis of this second report from the forest ranger in Yellowstone I am ready to suggest a possibility."

He hesitated for an instant, reluctant to remember what he had seen in East Berlin: pickled specimens of giant grasshoppers bred by Nazi scientists to drop on England's grain fields before the harvest of 1945—had the war not ended when it did. Then he took a deep breath and said quickly, "In my opinion it is possible that the United States is now being attacked by an unknown form of biological warfare, aimed at infesting our most inaccessible wilderness areas with a totally new species of organism, undoubtedly harmful. They appear, from this description, to be giant insects."

The Chief scowled. "Oh, bugs," he said. He took the report, read it, and chuckled. "This poor Irishman has just seen a flock of monkey-faced owls, that's all. They're odd little fellows, I'll admit—enough to give anyone a fright, first time you see one at close range." Then his smile faded. "But owls don't travel in great swarms, do they?"

"No, sir. Nor do they have transparent wings, and feelers. Besides, this man is a forest ranger, not a scared tenderfoot."

"Federal employees can get the delirium tremens the same as anybody else," the Chief snapped. "However, your theory ties in with some highly unpleasant reports we've been getting from Tibet, concerning biological-warfare preparations. Although I don't believe one word of this, I can't take any chances on these d.t.'s being real. Colonel, you're a self-confessed mountain-climber—and a naturalist, by implication. I want you to fly to Yellowstone tonight. Get on that peak. Pick up the pieces, if there are any. And capture specimens, of course."

"Of course," said Colonel Clark, and swallowed hard.

"Bring back what you find, under heavy guard and in complete secrecy. The Joints Chiefs of Staff will want to examine the evidence before any public announcement is made. We've got to be sure where these creatures

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are coming from before we retaliate. Work under cover. If this is a hoax, don't make us a laughing-stock." He started toward the telephone. "By daylight, I'll have all the suspected points surrounded so tight a midget can't get through." He picked up the receiver, but held the points down. "Take your sergeant with you, as far as the last telephone. She will relay your reports to me personally. She's the only one around here who knows my verbal code by heart. That is all."

"Yes, sir," said the colonel. Sergeant Summers already had her hat on, and was handing his to him, as the well-trained sergeant sometimes does for field grade officers. As they started through the door, the Chief called to them, with a worried laugh, "And, by the way, don't forget what day tomorrow is!"

Colonel Clark had lived the bleak life of the sullen lands so long that for a moment he did not grasp the Chief's allusion. Whereupon he did three things which marked him as a career officer. He saluted smartly, got out of sight, and asked his sergeant.

"Why, it's April Fools' Day, sir," she said, trying not to smile. She failed. "You've been away too long," she said. And as her smile broke through he suddenly remembered all the days he had be missing: Valentine's Day, the Fourth of July, Hallowe'en, Thanksgiving, Christmas; and Sundays, fifty-two a year. He had a lot of lost holidays to make up, lost living and lost laughter.

As they checked out of the building he had an inspiration. "Our orders were to work under cover," he said. "That means we must change into civilian clothes. Take all your prettiest. In front of people, I shall be compelled to call you Holly. I'm an aircraft salvage engineer; you are my secretary. And you probably had better be my niece, too, since we'll be traveling together. You may call me Uncle Kenneth."

She eyed him doubtfully.

"Any questions?" he demanded, in the voice of command.

"Yes, sir. Do I have to say 'Uncle'?"

"Must I repeat that as a direct order, sergeant?"

"No, sir. 'A superior's desire is an implied command,'" she quoted.

It was his turn to eye her doubtfully. He hoped that was not her idea of an April Fools' joke on him. Desire, hell! He was in love, damn it.

TIM Mahon had been holding his revolver in his trembling hands ever since he saw the first few dozen of them fluttering on his windshield, looking in at him with fiery eyes, some hours ago. When they had finally swarmed

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over him, toward midnight, they came so fast he had no chance to shoot, or use his radio. The windows of his truck were closed tight, but they wriggled up between the floorboards.

Tim could see there was no use offering resistance to a force that obviously could not be resisted. The heart had gone out of the matter, for him, anyway. His second report had been openly derided, and relayed to a higher authority with reluctance. The head ranger had ordered him to stay parked until he was sober enough to drive. "You're having the d.t.'s," Tim was told. "You are going to be disciplined for drinking on duty." Tim, who took the pledge the day he became an American citizen, thirty years before, and had never broken it, even on St. Patrick's Day!

It was the loneliest of feelings, to be the first man on earth to see something new, and to be jeered at for your pains. It made him feel cut off from the human race. Fortunately, a man's loyalty need no longer be confined to the merely human race, he saw. There were other, smarter species, it appeared.

These little devils were obviously clever. Getting here from so great a distance must have been a tremendous problem for them, technically. They had accomplished more than men could manage, although many men were trying to do what they had done. Yes, this was really a foreign invasion, and Tim Mahon was only mildly ashamed to admit that he was glad to see them come. The world could not have gone on the way it had been going, deadlocked. Intervention had to come from somewhere else. He wondered weakly if this was what Ariel Hotspur meant by "The Third Force."

How beautiful their eyes were, sparkling like jewels! When they put their little heads together, as they were doing now, it was the shining of their many-colored eyes that made the iridescent light he had first noticed on the mountain peak. There must be millions of them, to make great balls of fire.

He was afraid he knew what they were. As a boy, he had kept a sharp eye open for them as he ran barefoot through the bogs. He murmured a little prayer in Gaelic that his grandmother had taught him, when he was six, for just such an occasion.

At the sound of his voice, not speaking English, they all whirled and looked at him inquiringly. Tim nodded foolishly and helplessly, like a fascinated sparrow falling off a branch into a serpent's open mouth. Their long red tongues flickered in and out. They seemed to want him to turn on the radio. He got Professor Muntz, whom the network

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was keeping on the air as a marathon psychiatrist to nervous millions who needed soothing explanations of the inexplicable events that swept America that night.

"It is idiotic to call these aircraft space-ships, as some alarmists are doing," Muntz cried in alarm. "We have no legal evidence of where these aircraft came from until reputable scientists . . . ahem . . . have examined them; but since none has been officially observed, their alleged occupants do not exist, either. Furthermore, please note that all reports received so far come from high altitudes, where anoxemia—lack of oxygen—makes men pitifully susceptible to hallucinations such as 'abominable snowmen,' gremlins and similar dream images of the subconscious mind."

At this, the winged creatures in the truck hissed and wriggled with evident amusement. Hoping then that they would understand him, too, Tim Mahon began to talk. Speaking hesitantly, as if ashamed of his own words, he confessed that he had always been a sympathizer. He had kept it secret, he said, because of the uncompromising attitude that almost all Americans took toward such ideas nowadays. But now that they had actually invaded America, he swore that they could trust him. They listened to his confession in silence, arching their feelers. Minutes ticked by. Masses of them went streaming past his truck, creeping, gliding.

He said it was nearly midnight, and if he failed to report on the hour, reinforcements would be rushed to Lookout Point —people who weren't on their side, as he had always been. He promised to say whatever they told him to say, to be their man.

They liked this. There was a hum of approval. A big red one lighted on his shoulder and began to whisper in his ear. He shuddered as its slender body pressed against his cheek, for it was scaly. But that, as he recalled his grandmother's saying, was only to be expected. . . .

Tim Mahon's voice was heartily persuasive when he reported promptly at midnight. "Everything is O.K. up here," he said. "No sign of enemy activity. The wreckage of the first space-ship is burning briskly, and is nearly all consumed."

"Message received," said the dispatcher in disgust. "Over and out." He turned to the tall, well-matched couple who stood beside him in the ranger station. "That was the man nearest the crash," he said. "Did he sound sober to you, Mr. Clark?"

"He sounded to me," said the man in slacks and sports jacket, "as if he might have kissed the Blarney Stone. The firm I represent will be extremely grateful if

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you'd have your best driver take me up to Lookout Point immediately to visit the scene of the crash. It may have been one of our planes. And where is the nearest phone, from there?"

"The last phone up that way," said the head ranger, "is at Mahon's own cabin. His wife will let you in."

The man turned to the tall girl in tailored tweed beside him. "Then that's where you get off, Holly."

She nodded. She had not said "Uncle" yet.

AS Mother Earth turned her best cheek to the sun on the first day of the new month, a motley army of forest rangers, picnickers, backwoods sheriffs, civilian defense workers, State Troopers, soldiers, sailors and Marines converged upon each of the suspected points of invasion. The dreaded word *invasion* was now being openly used, in the darkness before the dawn. At the sound of it, most able-bodied American men near a danger-point simply picked up whatever weapon was at hand—a shotgun, an axe, a pool cue—and joined the instinctive flow of human corpuscles toward the infected wound.

All night the small-plane pilots of the Civil Air Patrol had been risking their lives in night reconnaissance through narrow mountain passes where it was suicide for fast military planes to fly. They had been radioing repeated reports of abundant life in all the barren places where the lights were seen. Excited pilots described the creatures variously as flying squirrels, frogs, huge moths, wasps, quail, tiny monkeys, and albino bats.

At dawn, a heavily armed patrol of para-ski-troopers, crossing a snowfield in Yellowstone National Park, found a vast trampled area. A brawny lieutenant on the point raised his ski-pole. The men behind him stopped on their skis. He stooped. "Bird tracks," he whispered. "Millions of birds."

A chubby captain glided over, pointed to small, distinct footprints at the edge of the trampled highway. "Baby animals," he muttered.

The gray-haired major beside them kicked off his skis and knelt in the snow. "God help us!" he said.

He was not a chaplain, but a zoologist. Called from reserve because of the emergency, he had volunteered to accompany this advanced patrol in the absence of sufficient adequately trained biological counter-warfare experts. The night's wild rumors of king-sized vermin being dumped on the United States from interplanetary space amused rather than alarmed Doctor Hartley. As

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an honest scientist, he admitted that torrents of small living creatures have at times poured down from the sky, quite inexplicably. Sometimes they were species previously unknown or not native to the continent where they dropped, but there was no case of these sky-falls doing any damage, except to scientific theories. Usually they were immature or larval forms of insects, fish, or harmless reptiles.

Until this moment the zoologist had trusted nature, whimsical as she might be at times; but now his lips curled back in horror. He picked up from the snow a slender tube of scaly stuff. He examined it very closely. As author of "Snakes of the World," he knew the distinctive patterns of snakeskins as a professional philatelist knows postages stamps from every country.

When he spoke, his voice shook. "This is part of the skin of a Russian viper," he said slowly, "—an exceedingly poisonous snake found only in Soviet territory."

He wondered numbly how they made them fly. Those fiends, perverting Nature. But with guns at their backs, Soviet scientists might be compelled to do anything, however loathsome. Some of the world's greatest geneticists had been Russians. And of course there had been flying reptiles, like the pterodactyl, among the prehistoric monsters. With enough atomic radiation splitting up her genes and chromosomes, Mother Nature, like a bishop, might eventually be tortured into monstrous fabrications. Major Hartley turned to a corporal with a walkie-talkie. "Can you reach somebody in Central Intelligence on that thing? In the next few hours we may need every snakebite kit in the United States." . . .

That was the morning when the sun rose on roadblocks across our highways. Land-mines were being laid in farmers' fields. Barbed-wire entanglements were thrown across the mouths of canyons. Shallow trenches filled with fuel oil were ready to be fired. None of these protective measures did any good. With the first rays of sunlight the invaders were upon us, flitting over roadblocks, skipping over minefields without exploding them, and sliding through barbed wire. There was not the lightest possibility of stopping them with any weapon known to us. They dodged rifle bullets as easily as birds dodge snowballs. They flew, they swam, they dug.

While soldiers lowered their rifles and rubbed their eyes, children started chasing the invaders through the woods, screaming with delight. Terrified parents chased the children, screaming too, with fear the children would

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be stung or bitten, but at the same time not quite daring to believe their eyes. However, there were no fatalities on any front, and few casualities more serious than shock. Usually it was not until a child had brought one to you, not really catching it, but rather leading it along on a fingertip—that most adults were willing to concede that they actually saw the little monsters. And then only with the "I'll wake up in a minute" feeling of a nightmare.

The invaders moved so fast that detailed observations were difficult. They seemed able to sense human intentions. At the first thought of capture they darted out of reach. Everyone saw them differently. Some people have never seen one yet. They came in different colors, shapes, and sizes. The smallest were only a few inches long. The largest, reported from Texas, ran to two feet, and anyone who saw one of those, ran much farther. There was a brown kind that burrowed in the earth faster than a mole. There was a slim bright kind that never came down from the treetops. There was a transparent variety that dived into our streams and lakes and drinking-water reservoirs, where it was very hard to see at all, except as a ripple moving were no ripple ought to be. The in-between kinds, which were bolder, would just about have fitted into a quart milk bottle, if anyone had been able to catch one. But no one could. They wriggled out of fingers like eels. All were extremely slender and supple. Even full-grown specimens weighed so little that one could be sitting on your shoulder and you wouldn't know it, until he or she tickled you with the long, feathery antennae they all had growing from their tiny heads. But even our assumption that they were males and females was merely a surmise based on the most fleeting impressions.

By lunch-time, that first wild day in the woods, most people had given up trying to make heads or tails of what was happening. Some men sat around with bottles in their hands, bemused. Others went walking in the woods, alone, to think. Some women said no good would come of this. Others said, "Now I've seen everything." Children insisted that if you sat quite still and got a good close look at one of them, they were really very pretty. But children think that about all sorts of horrid creatures. The few who were still willing to qualify as responsible witnesses agreed it seemed safe to assume that these little things —no one knew what to call them —were doing no immediate harm, although they certainly were capable of mischief. They

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bore no weapons, so far as anyone could see. Their war aims were obscure. They seemed more interested in the contents of picnic baskets than in military objectives. They liked milk and honey best.

THEIR infiltration of our towns and cities, carried out that afternoon, followed no recognizable strategy. They simply joined up with families whose children fed them sweets, and went home with them. Despite their speed, they seemed unable to fly long distances, and quickly tired. Long streams of cars, homeward-bound, were covered with them. Whenever cars stopped, they scattered. Anyone who had been in the country, that day, brought home enough for all the neighbors, whether anybody wanted them or not. By sundown, most families had at least one in the house, flying aimlessly around, poised in jewel-like clarity an instant, like a hummingbird, then darting away in a blur of speed too fast for the human eye to follow. Parents had an unusually hard time getting the children to bed, that night. If the country had not been curiously keyed up with anticipation, there would have been many more cases of hysterics than there were. We had been expecting something. This was what we got: a bizarre April Fools' Day joke in the form of a deluge of tiny creatures of a hitherto unknown but seemingly harmless species.

Many of us wouldn't have believed it, even then, had not Ariel Hotspur emerged from the wilderness in time for his regular broadcast that evening with an explanation that satisfied about half of our population, mostly younger people. He had spent the night, he said, in a magnificent spaceship, which had then gone away for another load. The Quixies, he said, had come from the planet Tikva, seventh satellite of the seventh star in the constellation of Cassiopeia. They had descended on the troubled earth, he said, to see if they could help us, somehow. Although related to the bumblebee, they were harmless, he declared. Since they could not talk, or hear, he had been compelled to communicate with them, he said, by means of extra-sensory perception.

To satisfy the other half of the people, who took no stock in either mindreading or interplanetary travel, the network gave Professor Muntz the next fifteen minutes to present the other party's point of view. "There are several of these so-called Quixies flitting about my microphone as I speak to you tonight," he said. "While I have not yet been able to capture and dissect a specimen, or even to see one very closely, I assure you that they

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did not come from some other planet. In the first place, everything about them looks familiar, except that they are put together in a different way, and are much smaller than they should be. It is my hypothesis that they are hybrids. In the second place, for any form of life to have mastered the immense technical difficulties of space travel presupposes a degree of engineering skill and scientific knowledge some centuries ahead of ours. These little pests —*pfui*, get away from me!—obviously have not the slightest knowledge of modern science or machinery, else they'd not be getting into trouble all the time—Help!" With a sudden buzz, Muntz went off the air.

And so did many listeners. Even as he spoke, hundreds of housewives were wailing with dismay to discover that they had accidentally shut a dozen Quixies in the oven with the roast. Heat turned them bright red, and made them hopping mad, but otherwise did little harm. Thousands of men were opening refrigerators for more ice cubes—every ice cube in America was mobilized that night—and yelling for help when they discovered more Quixies, inadvertently imprisoned, standing up among the bottles, stiff. Cold turned them into blue streaks. They got into vacuum cleaners and electric fans, with deplorable results. Touch the toaster, and up they'd pop, browned-off. Their curiosity was equaled only by their durability. They seemed to have charmed lives, for no dead Quixies were ever found.

At 10 P.M., and again at eleven, all channels were cleared for a special announcement from Washington; but this was delayed. No one wanted to make it, because it was not good news. Besides, as every politician knows, the Quixie boom was liable to bust at any instant, like a pricked balloon. Where would you be then, if you had stuck your neck out with a statement of this kind? America had recovered from illusions more serious than Quixies, overnight. The buck was passed down the chain of command, lower and lower, until somebody's secretary finally had the bright idea of handing the hot potato to Professor Muntz. Millions were tuned to him already. As a thoroughly respectable scientist he enjoyed a special immunity from error that senators might envy. If he made an ass of himself he could always say science had made new findings.

On the stroke of midnight, Muntz said in sepulchral tones, "A swarm of so-called Quixies invaded the New York subway and were caught in the rush-hour crush. Their remains, examined microscopically, prove that they

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are spiders—flying spiders. A quantity of spider web was found. All spiders are venomous. Beware! They may begin to bite at any moment . . . Ouch!"

THIS dreadful news kept many families up all night, nailing in their screens and spraying DDT. But nothing stopped the Quixies. They seemed to have the spiders' trick of flattening themselves paper-thin to squeeze through narrow cracks, plus the termites' talent for coming out of the woodwork. And no matter how vigorously you swatted them, the most anyone ever got as tangible proof that they existed was a wisp of silky stuff, or a shred of crackly skin covered with bright scales. A few people reported tiny sounds like mocking laughter, but in the general excitement such hallucinations were only to be expected, doctors said.

Doctors, that is, who had not heard the sound themselves.

In the morning, a great many people, especially men who had consumed large quantities of ice cubes, got up expecting that the Quixies would be gone. But they were not. There were twice as many. And it was clear to any adult, from observing their behavior, that they were multiplying at a merry rate. That they were of two sexes was now more than a surmise. They were amorous as butterflies, with somewhat fewer inhibitions. Schoolteachers had a rugged day, and parents a rough evening trying to explain about the birds and bees, when it was fairly obvious to Junior that the Quixies were neither one.

Fortunately for the national morale, Quixies were fickle little creatures, rapidly transferring their attentions from one family to another. They paused barely long enough to get acquainted, and never stayed where they were seriously disliked. It was the children who encouraged them to stay, who fed them milk and sweets, hid them when extermination squads came searching, and who probably were their accomplices in what happened later.

Kenneth Clark straightened his aching back and stopped for breath. He felt lightheaded from the altitude, from lack of sleep, and from what he saw. With a gesture of impatience at the wreckage strewn around him, he said:

"If this junk ever flew, then I'm a monkey's uncle."

"Perhaps you are, Mr. Clark," said Tim Mahon, with a chuckle. "I mean, if you believe in evolution, we all have distant relatives who live in trees."

The weary colonel gave the ranger an exasperated look. This smiling Irishman hadn't been much help. They had finally had

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to send for a Marine helicopter to put them on the peak of Devil's Dunce Cap. That had taken hours to arrange, through channels. Now it was sunset, the job wasn't finished, and the pilot was anxious to hop back across to Lookout Point before darkness fell. "Got to tie whirly-bird down tight," he said. "Too much wind up here."

TOO much hot air, too, Clark thought, listening to Tim Mahon extend his enthusiastic but confusing aid. Clark took photographs and measurements of the wreckage. He numbered every part with crayon, wrapped each in tissue paper and packed them into numbered boxes, each corresponding to a certain numbered square foot of bare rock. The odd-looking fragments were small, and the boxes were light, to make them easier to remove by air.

"Pick up everything, no matter what it is," Clark reminded Tim, who was bustling about. "See, you're overlooking something—*this*." He bent and picked up a fragile shred of something shiny.

"But that's only a bit of old snakeskin," Tim laughed. "You don't want that, Mr. Clark."

Clark saw Tim was right, and felt chagrined. For an instant it had seemed a fragment from a sequin gown. To save face before the grinning ranger, Clark growled, "When I say everything, I mean everything," and demonstratively put the shred into his empty cigarette case—his very empty cigarette case.

He felt edgy with frustration. All afternoon the radio in the parked 'copter had been whooping about Quixies; but the closest he had come to one was to see the last of them hastily leaving the peak as the big helicopter hovered in. Whatever they were, every child in America would have a specimen before Colonel Clark of the Central Intelligence Agency, sent at great expense to capture same. They had looked like out-sized dragonflies to him. What had he called them as a boy? Snake feeders.

Suddenly he asked the ranger, "How would a snake get 'way up here?"

"Why, the hawks and eagles catch them down in the gorge and carry them up here to eat," Tim answered readily. He had an answer for everything, it seemed.

The pilot was warming up the engine. "All ashore that's going ashore," he called. "We can't take your boxes off tonight. Started too late. Try tomorrow." The rotors began to turn.

Mahon climbed into the cabin promptly. "This is no place to spend the night, Mister!" he he called. "I know!"

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RELUCTANTLY, Clark left the boxes of parts on the peak. He was in a black mood when he finally reached Mahon's cabin. Nor was he mollified by the fact that Mary Mahon had baked a cake, and Holly Summers, looking delightfully domestic in an apron, was icing it. There are times in a man's life when even being in love doesn't help. "Any news from the home office?" he growled.

"Only that no wreckage was found on any of the other mountains, Kenneth," she said, smiling. The mountain air had done her good. Her cheeks were as rosy as Mary's.

A knock sounded on the door. Tim sprang up and opened it; a gray-haired major stood in the doorway. "I'm looking for Colonel Clark of the Central Intelligency Agency," he said, with scholarly innocence.

Clark groaned; where he had been recently, a slip like that could cost your life. "Come in," he said.

"I'm Major Hartley," the other said, entering. "In civilian life, a herpetologist." He took out his handkerchief and carefully unwrapped it. "I've found something very puzzling that may bear upon your investigation." He laid three narrow strips of scaly stuff on the table. "I've been studying the so-called Quixies all day," he went on. "They shed these. All are the skins of a species of snakes found only in Russia and China."

Colonel Clark took out his cigarette case. "I have something to show you, too," he said. "I found it on the peak where the alleged space-ship landed—the rocket that never flew."

Major Hartley examined what Clark had found. "*Something* flew!" he said. "This is the skin of an Asiatic adder. Its habitat is east of the Caspian Sea, from Turkestan into Tibet. Its bite is death."

Three Quixies flitted down the chimney, darted through the flames of the log fire, and attacked the icing bowl. The others had seen them before, and were more or less accustomed to them. Tim Mahon, in fact, seemed quite at home with them, though he had been alone when Clark surprised him on Lookout Point at sunrise, with bloodshot eyes and and unsteady manner.

Tim lit his pipe and beamed. "Ah, what a tale the little things could tell, if they could only talk! Coming from another world!"

Colonel Clark, who was definitely not used to Quixies, said nothing. For the rest, the fact had preceded the explanations, and any theory is better than none. Whereas, he had been listening to theories all day, and was only now confronted by the fact. Three saucy little facts!

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And the theories didn't fit them. He watched the Quixies very closely, as they pranced and nibbled, making hissing sounds. The largest one was blue, the middle-sized one yellow, and the smallest one was pink.

Clark fancied he saw something vaguely familiar in their slyly-slanted eyes. It seemed to him he recognized their hissing sounds. He knew his nerves must be at the breaking-point to entertain such fancies as now flitted through his mind. Yet what could be more fantastic than the enemy's foul plans for world conquest, by any means? He knew at first hand the nature of the enemy: ruthless, cunning, Godless, and engaged in scientific experiments of a type forbidden by law in every Christian nation. Why put anything past them? These accursed, verminous Quixies . . . that crazy little dance they were doing, squatting and kicking, then leaping high into the air and whirling. Clark had seen that done somewhere before, on a much larger scale.

Suddenly he did what he had often done before, when goaded beyond endurance by far-fetched hunches. He acted on blind impulse. He stood up and approached the three Quixies, calling them every bad name he could think of in fluent, idiomatic Russian, a language rich as compost in earthly oaths. He made references, more pungent than are possible in any other language, to their ancestry, personal habits and dietary preferences.

The two larger Quixies, sensing his intention, glared and flitted out of the kitchen. But the smallest one, apparently an immature specimen, and very full of rum-flavored icing, was taken by surprise. He whirled, turned scarlet and squeaked in a tiny but clear voice, *"Ti tozhe!"* Then he clapped both hands over his mouth, looked quickly around to see if the others had heard him, and for an instant was overcome by terror. In that instant Holly turned the big glass mixing-bowl upside down, trapping him beneath its dome against the table.

"What did he say?" she asked.

Clark passed his hand across his face in a dazed and dreamlike gesture. "He said, 'You're another'—in Russian." He put his hand down hard on the glass bowl as if to hold it firm against the furious buzzing beneath, but in reality to keep from tottering. He feared that he was going to faint. He felt quite ill.

"Yes, they talk," the major said coolly. "I've been listening to them all day. But it isn't only Russian. I've identified words in at least a dozen eastern European languages." He stooped and squinted through the glass. "The skin of this specimen has the mottled markings of a water-

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snake found only in the Volga River region," he announced.

THE officer looked at the calm scientist and marveled. "How can you stand a thing like this?" he asked.

"Because it is a fact," the major said. "Besides, I've had all day to get over the shock. I've expected some development like this. We split the atomic nucleus and look what happened. Now somebody has messed up the nucleus of living cells—and look what comes out." He took out a magnifying glass. "How odd! In addition to the scales, there is an area of silky substance, plainly spider web. But the wings and antennae resemble those of a giant bee, most intelligent of the social insects." He nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, that's what I'd start with, if I were a Red geneticist: bees. I'd cross-breed the queen bee up, and up the evolutionary scale until I had a race of half-human super-bees. With them, I could rule the world." He laughed. "If I were mad enough to want that job."

"I know one Red who is," said Clark harshly. "And because he is a madman, I am ready now to face the facts." He looked grimly at the captive Quixie. "Maybe this little fellow is going to tell us a tale after all," he said ominously. He felt drunk, and for a moment wished he were. Then he felt cold sober, cold with hatred, colder than he ever had been before. "If the Russians can breed human wits into snakes and spiders," he said, "we'll scare those wits right back out of them, and learn what this is all about. Major, you're a zoologist. Catch me a rattlesnake and a blackwidow spider. Let's see how really biological war can get!"

"Look out behind," said Holly.

Clark whirled.

"I was merely going to remark," said Tim Mahon, relaxing, "that there are no snakes in Ireland, Colonel!" He laughed heartily, and went back to his chair.

That night the wind laughed in the woods. And in the morning all the boxes of wreckage were gone from the Devil's Dunce Cap. Through Tim Mahon's binoculars Colonel Clark could see a few of them faintly, a mile below in the gorge along the banks of the Yellowstone River.

Because of the date on which the news broke, no editor would touch the Quixie story with a ten-foot pole—until a Quixie stepped into his inkwell and danced across a page, leaving tiny footprints shaped like exclamation points.

When city-dwellers went to work on April 2nd they found Quixies flying up and down the elevator shafts in hotels and

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apartment houses. Air-conditioning systems distributed them equitably among the tenants in the office buildings. Florists' shops were teeming with the smallest kind. They hid in flowers and got themselves delivered. The transparent species came out of faucets. The brown ones had tunneled into the New York subways, where they were making people laugh at their peculiar antics. It had been a long time since anybody had laughed in the subway.

For the rest of that week we were all too busy getting used to Quixies to pay much attention to the foreign news. The world's reactions to news from the United States about our Quixie invasion were curiously mixed. The British Isles believed us. The Continent did not. A Paris daily gibed, "When bigger bugs are seen, Americans will see them." A German paper said the Quixies were ingenious mechanical toys, infringing German patents. Most other Europeans merely shrugged and said the fact that all Americans were crazy was certainly not news to them. Radio Moskva muttered in its beard about "a government so desperate to distract the toilers it must drug the masses with childish illusions."

Whatever the Quixies were, they were not illusions. Even when you closed your eyes you could feel them tickle you, could smell the flowerlike scent they left behind, could hear their tiny music and see the endless mischief they made. They got into everywhere and everything, upstairs, downstairs and in milady's chamber: They opened trunks in attics and scattered old love-letters. They found secret diaries in locked drawers. They got into filing cabinets. There was a flurry at the State Department when confidential files were opened at a security investigation, and a nest of pinkish Quixies were found boring from within. One rare lavender variety, with owlish golden eyes, specialized in creeping along bookshelves, peering myopically at titles.

These antics soon led ignorant laymen to suspect that Quixies could read more than minds. But Professor Muntz explained that, too. "They are merely imitative," he said. "And I must warn you of an ominous increase in laughing-fits, resulting in partial amnesia of a peculiar type. These creatures may be vectors—carriers of a germ that attacks the central nervous system. Its consequences to the human race could be terrific. *Quixies must be exterminated! They are dangerous*"

DANGEROUS, perhaps; disappointing, surely. For on April 15th a committee of scientists made an announcement that

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more or less confirmed Ariel Hotspur's contention that the Quixies were not of the earth. We had expected more from interplanetary visitors. More than one otherwise respectable adult had been secretly hoping that when the little people hopped out of the flying saucers they would bring some miracle of wisdom from an older world to save our adolescent planet from its youthful follies.

And now the mountain of our last hope had labored and brought forth mice—Mickey Mice! Other gentle readers, of more violent tastes, had predicted global war against mighty bug-eyed monsters from beyond, a war that would unite the nations, willy-nilly, in a common cause. But these tiny nuisances were neither fish nor fowl. They brought us nothing, taught us nothing, worked us neither benefit nor harm—so far as anyone could see. They were just one more thing to get in our hair.

Philosophically, it was the last straw for the harassed businessman or general or diplomat to look up from worries which appeared insoluble, and see a flock of Quixies playing leapfrog on the window-ledge outside. If these inconsequential little critters were the best the starry universe could send us in our earth's darkest hour of need, then life itself might be no more than a cosmic April Fools' joke, funny for a day, and mercifully over.

Considering that they were from a backward planet, the Quixies learned fast. Soon they no longer got shut in ovens and refrigerators. Housewives who set out saucers of sweetened milk for them could get their vacuum cleaners and electric dishwashers repaired overnight. There was even said to be a special kind of Quixie-genius that could fix a television set. Thousands of people hopefully set out saucers, but this turned out to be expecting too much of the Quixies.

The April 15th announcement merely said the wreckage found in Yellowstone "was not the work of human hands." At least that was the majority report. The dissenting minority report was hastily suppressed. After maddening delays, Colonal Clark finally had brought his evidence to the central air force laboratories at Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio. It had taken him a week to pick up the pieces a second time, along the river. Some key exhibits were never found. Others, scattered far and wide, were mixed with the kitchen-midden that untidy campers leave behind. It was difficult for the baffled and embittered colonel to decide what to pick up and what to leave. Each party of eager sight-seers visiting that now-historic spot added new mish-mash to the midden. Experts wrangled over a weird

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compound lens that was finally identified as the bulge of a broken Coca Cola bottle. What seemed to be a non-Terran spaceship's navigation chart turned out to be a page torn from a wholly Terran magazine illustrating astrogation. And yet, mixed in with junk, there were small parts of precious metals, hand-forged and delicately wrought with skill beyond our jewelers' finest art.

Smarting from a stinging rebuke delivered by the Chief for failure to produce conclusive evidence, Colonel Clark sat morosely eyeing his captive Quixie, who refused to talk. He was a cocky little character, lounging in a plate-glass terrarium among flowering plants that gave him oxygen and food. The colonel and his sergeant had never had it so good. Nothing could break him down. He charmed snakes like a little Hindu, and drew their fangs. He trussed spiders up in their own webs.

Sergeant Summers came in and sat down beside the colonel. For many hours each day she worked within arm's-reach of him, but between them still stretched the Sahara that divides the officer from the soldier in all the armies of the world. Due to cruel optical illusions peculiar to desert wastes, it was possible for a beautiful oasis to seem marvelously close to a parched traveler, and still be infinitely far away.

The moon was full again on the night the breakdown came—the sergeant's. She had been on duty eighteen hours when she began to crack. "I can't take it any more," she said. "You're too cruel."

"I'm not hurting him," Clark said irritably. "He can't be hurt. I've got to use psychology on him, if we're ever going to get a confession."

"I don't mean *him*," she said. "I mean *me*. I can't go on loving you with that brass curtain between us, and the commander of our detachment won't give me an honorable separation from the service. I know, because I asked her. She says I'm indispensable. Says if I marry without permission she'll get me transferred as far away as possible from wherever you are stationed. There's a confession if you want one, Colonel." Then she began to cry.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" said the colonel. "Praise Allah! I'm a happy guy." His eyes filled.

The Quixie began to flutter nervously.

"Now wait a minute," he squeaked in alarm. "Stop that, both of you." He hammered on the glass. "You're killing me!" he shrilled. He did seem to be getting smaller. "I'll tell you everything you want to know, if you'll kiss each other and stop bawling. Tears from star-crossed lovers on moonlit nights are the one thing we can't stand!"

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They looked at each other, and at him. He was literally dying, shrinking to a wisp. "Hurry!" he gasped.

"This is in the national interest, Sergeant," said the colonel, and took her in his arms.

For the rest of that night they took testimony, and the Quixie lived to tell his tale. He's living still. When it was daylight, the sergeant's notebook was full of shorthand. "If we show this to the Chief we're both going to get mental discharges," she sighed.

"That, my dear," said the colonel, "is practically the only solution to our problem, now." He felt very businesslike as he stood up. "It may be the solution to the international problem, too, if what this little Russian says is true."

"You'll soon find out that what *my* kind of Russian says *is* true!" the Quixie chirped.

"I believe him," Holly said, as she began to type, smiling. Then she looked up guiltily. "But a girl in love will believe anything, won't she?"

"She is the source of all man's beliefs," said the Quixie wisely, with a wink.

Sergeant Summers wiped the smile off her face.

"Now step on it," the colonel ordered.

"Do you mean the smile, or the typing, sir?" she asked with cool military formality.

UNFORTUNATELY, all military papers must proceed through channels. Before the notebook full of shorthand had been transcribed, all channels were clogged with Intelligence reports of trouble in Russia.

On May Day, there was no parade in Moscow. Instead of cheers, alarming rumbles issued from behind the iron and bamboo curtains. The Dragon and the Bear, uneasy bedfellows, were growling and breathing fire at each other, for a change. On May 3rd, America forgot the Quixies in a red-hot eruption of foreign news. The agricultural economy of the slave states of Eurasia was breaking down. The Politburo blamed their late spring on the North American Treaty Organization. Pravda printed gruesome lists of Soviet agronomists who had been shot for alleged sabotage on seed-grain farms, charging "a concerted plot, organized by imperialist agents, to starve the Russian people by making seeds infertile." Then came difficulties over cattle on collective farms, leading to bullheaded reprisals, and nonfulfillment of the poultry plan, which made the feathers fly. A strange weakness, not caused by any known disease, attacked the grapevines of Crimea. Streetfighting broke out in Yalta between the workers in the vineyards and the militia. Meanwhile

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there was a wave of something the Russian police called arson. Fires started on collective farms. Usually the chairman's hut burned first. And since no mishap is ever accidental in a planned economy, there were more arrests, although the victims themselves swore the fires were caused by sparks from their own hearths.

From Western embassies in Moscow came reports of growing nervousness among the Soviet officials with whom they had to deal. Some looked as if they had not slept for days. Pravda hinted that the Western powers were wafting a mysterious nerve-gas over Eastern Europe, causing insomnia. From every side came angry intimations that the Bear, stung blind by invisible bees, was on the verge of running amok. But never a word of Quixies from anywhere in all Eurasia. Even a Moscow correspondent could not have been prevented from seeing Quixies, had there been any.

The blowup came in June. Mounting waves of Red Army deserters fleeing into the Allied Zones of Western Germany confirmed rumors of wide-spread biological warfare being waged against the food crops and farm animals of Russia and China by an unknown, unseen enemy. On June 10th, the chief of the biological warfare section of the Red Army, Colonel-General Z. Z. Zverov, fled the country one jump ahead of a firing squad and sought sanctuary in the American Embassy in India, where he was quoted as saying: "Whatever it is that you Americans are dropping on us leaves no trace, poisons nothing, and yet disrupts fertility and growth. I was ordered to counteract it. I could not carry out my orders. That is when a Russian leaves this life—or Russia."

On Friday, June 13th, the Bear finally went berserk. Stalin, or a voice claiming to be Stalin's, blamed all their troubles on American germ-warfare agents, working underground. Russia demanded their surrender within one day, under threat of war. The deadline passed. No agents surrendered, there being none. With that, the world stumbled reluctantly into war. But the edge of Russian striking power was dulled by disaffection, and no sudden blows were struck.

IT was a queer war from the start: Hardly anyone got hurt except Russian generals who failed to take objectives in the scheduled time. Tanks stood stalled for miles, with water in their carburetors or bugs in the ignition. Artillery misfired. Rockets went up, but where they came down, nobody knew. Guided missiles were misguided.

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At once, all Quixies disappeared. "Frightened by the firing," people said, and went on digging air-raid shelters. We were glad that they were gone. We were in no mood for nonsense. Most of us were sick of the useless little creatures, flung at us from the sky as if in mockery of our prayers for Heaven's help.

Air raids were exchanged and bombs were dropped; but they did not explode, or even fall through people's roofs, for neither side's bombsights were working properly.

At sea, the war was odd. Submarines fired torpedoes, which played like porpoises around unhappy target ships, then dived forever to the unknown realms beneath the sea.

On the Fourth of July, the frustrated enemy began to drop atomic bombs, in desperation. We replied in suit. All theirs, and all ours, fizzled out in low-grade chain reactions, those embarrassing fiascos which chagrin the fighting physicist as a fallen omelet shames a chef, ruining the raw material, and never reaching the consumer. British flyers said the gremlins were back.

Sabotage by Quixies had been suspected from the first, and an army of special agents, under Colonel Clark, tried to stop their depredations. However, it is very difficult to catch a *saboteur* who may be no bigger than your finger and can read your mind a mile away. A squad of scientists, led by the colonel, swooped down on a super-bomber about to take off from Wausau, Wisconsin, for an annihilation raid on Leningrad. At great risk to their lives, they opened the atomic bomb, and saw a pair of Quixies, a pink one and a green one, cuddling deep down inside the mechanism. They refused to come out. There was no way of getting them out without risking the annihilation of Wausau. They were sprayed with plastic, which immobilized them, and the plane took off. But it developed engine trouble and had to turn back. Orders were to jettison the bomb on the North Pole. They did. It blew. But that was the last atomic bomb on earth.

Not even Quixies, however, could keep the infantry from fighting. Despite snarled communications, snafu'd orders, and wrong sizes issued by pixilated supply sergeants, men still got at each other with rifles and bayonets. The Bear, held at bay in Europe by strong allies in front of them and internal chaos in their rear, wheeled in desperation and launched a massive airborne attack upon Alaska. At dawn, on July 31st, the sky was full of parachutes. It was then that the Quixies finally lost their patience with the human race

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and used their secret weapon in full force. As the Red paratroopers rained down, they were not alone. Each had a Quixie on his shoulder, tickling him.

The Russians alighted laughing, dropped their weapons and strolled around peacefully. Most of them were husky peasant boys. They said Alaska didn't look like good farming country. They asked, "What are we doing here?"

Some of their officers laughed in choking spasms a long time before they laid down their pistols. When they finally stopped laughing they didn't know where they were, or how they got there.

MAJOR HARTLEY was with the first battalion of the American paratroop division that jumped on top of the invaders, applying the new doctrine of vertical encirclement. He stood on a little ridge and watched the American paratroopers round up the unresisting Russians wandering in the fields below. He had dreaded the savage hand-to-hand combat of a counter-jump. He had been prepared to give his life, the lives of all his men. Now he felt a great weight lifting from his heart. No lives were being lost. It looked more as if new lives were being found.

The chubby captain brought in a batch of grinning Russians. "This beats the living daylights out of me," he said. "These Russkys want to go home."

"So do I," said the major.

"They don't seem to know what guns are for!"

"I wish I didn't," said the major. He interrogated the prisoners in halting Russian. Smiling, they gave their names, but did not know their ranks or serial numbers, or see any necessity for either. They knew their native villages, and were homesick for them. But not one recalled ever hearing of a collective farm. Not one knew or cared who Stalin was, or had been. "It's not a Russian name," said one.

The major radioed headquarters. The general was brisk. "Yes, we can expect mass desertions whenever Russian troops land on American soil," he agreed. "Everything they see gives the lie to what they have been told. But don't let the first deserters fool you, Major. There are plenty of fanatical Communists behind them, who will come in fighting."

"Yes, sir," said the major, who knew better than to tell a general that this was not desertion, that this was something new. If what he hoped was true, all the generals would know, soon enough. He turned back to his cheerful prisoners and gave them an impromptu mental examination. Aside from being surprised at finding themselves in a strange

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place, they were perfectly normal. They could read and write, use tools, and take care of themselves in every way a grown man should. They had never heard of Communism, but they knew the names of all the trees and flowers and farm crops.

"This is that peculiar form of partial amnesia which Professor Muntz warned about," said the brawny lieutenant, coming up with more friendly Russians. "I could use a small attack of it myself. There is a certain thing in my past I'd give anything to forget." A Quixie lit on his shoulder and tickled him. He began to laugh.

A red-haired, freckled Russian boy asked the major what all this junk was—tommy-guns, grenades, flame-throwers—cluttering up the fields.

"Little brother," said the major, "I, too, have often wondered how God's green earth got cluttered up with junk like this."

At the word *Bog*—God—the Russian bowed his head and crossed himself, not furtively, but freely. What he remembered was enough for a new start.

Victor and vanquished, sinners and sinned against, mingled in the waves of mirth that swept across the battlefronts, erasing from the minds of men only the evil they had known, leaving the good to live on, and flourish, like a garden with the weeds pulled out. In Western Europe, priests recalled the laughing epidemics that ended the Dark Ages. Diabolical seizures, they had then been called. Now they were not so sure. Hilarity was never higher in sunny Italy and vivacious France. Gay Paree grew truly gay again, instead of smiling through her tears. Britain was once more Merry England.

IN China, where uncontrollable guffaws are regarded as extremely undignified, all members of the so-called people's parties lost face so badly they dared not show their faces again.

The satellite states fell away with gleeful shouts, but the end did not come easily in Russia. Too many people had too much to forget. It was a week before the Soviet Government admitted that "spider-snake-bees" were upon it.

The Quixies certainly knew their way around Russia. They didn't bother with the villages. They went straight to party headquarters, in major cities. They blanketed the Kremlin in a mass assault of rainbow colors. For three days the forces of suppression fought back grimly, never smiling. But when the embattled Politburo finally got it through its collective head that *Quixies could not be killed*, the rigid system began to break down and fall to pieces, its only

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basis for existence gone, the power to kill. Soon neutral embassies in Moscow—and there was an astonishing number of neutral nations in the world's last and shortest war—reported roars of old-time Russian laughter rolling over the Kremlin walls. They saw dancing in the streets, heard church bells ringing. The Russian censors, laughing fit to kill, passed any cable a foreign correspondent brought them. This, in turn, made many correspondents hysterical.

In factories, workers beat swords into plowshares. Consumers' goods appeared. Nothing worth the knowing had been forgotten, anywhere. Less than ten per cent of all the people in the world had needed to do much more than smile, for they had never really believed official policies of hate and violence.

Here at home, as Quixies reappeared, certain people started laughing, fit to kill. In Washington, some personalities not only got the horse-laugh, but gave it. In every State, a few characters became very tickled over something, and laughed themselves almost to death; no medicine could stop their paroxysms. But when the seizure passed, their minds were pleasantly blank, except for the three R's. Of themselves and of their "isms," all they could remember was that they were Americans, and proud of it. That would do, for a beginning.

When the last laughing fits were over and mankind's scribbled blackboard was washed clean, the Quixies faded into the background, keeping to the hills and dales.

By harvest-time, the world had settled down enough to get its crops in. Labor was plentiful, for the highways were thronged with people who had been shoved around for years, from one end of Europe to the other, but now were pilgrims moving toward a sacred shrine called Home. Problems of repatriation were solved by voting with the feet. The world was big enough for everyone, again.

Nature was as generous that golden autumn as she was tender in the spring. Northern Europe enjoyed an "Indian summer" for the first time in recorded history. Frost withheld its hand until the sheaves were gathered. And what a harvest everyone enjoyed that year, of bumper crops and of new understanding! Impromptu harvest festivals sprang up for the returning soldiers, for families reunited safe and whole. Nor was the stranger at the gate forgotten. There were no more strangers in the earth.

Statesmen—such of them as hadn't laughed themselves out of court—saw their hopes for peace realized on a global scale; and

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with total disarmament an actual fact, it proved possible to reduce taxes by fifty-two per cent, and still balance the budget. The cross of steel was lifted from the back of all humanity.

IT was a soft evening in October when Colonel Clark carried the glass case containing the Quixie up to the roof of the building. A harvest moon, like milk and honey, was rising over Washington.

"Ivan Ivanovich," he said, "tell me one last thing, and I will let you go. Why the phony spaceship? Why?"

The Quixie grinned slyly. "We got the idea from magazines our advance patrols found strewn about your parks and playgrounds, and from conferring with your children. Your comic books frightened us almost to death, at first, they were so funny; but then we decided that if you were willing to believe fantastic stuff like that, while scoffing at the wonders in plain sight, we had better stage an arrival you'd believe. Although it seemed to me that it would be much easier for you to come right out and believe in *us*!"

"We big guys do everything the hard way," said the colonel bitterly, opening the door of the terrarium. "You're a free Quixie. *Do-svidanya!*"

The little creature made a face. "I don't have to go back to Russia if I don't want to, do I? This is a free country, too. . . . Only one thing, though. Please stop calling me a *Quixie*. There ain't no such thing!"

Colonel Clark went to his office and typed out a final paragraph. "Add this to that statement to the press," he told his sergeant. "The confession is finally cleared for release." He stood up and hunted for his hat a long time before he found it. "And if my furlough has not come through," he said, "I'm going over the hill."

Sergeant Summers gave him a look of disapproval. Since the night when their momentary loss of self-control had caused the Quixie to confess, their relations had become even more stiffly formal than before. She refused to accept a commission or any discharge less than honorable. They could not meet furtively because that violated Army regulations. Sin was for civilians. "Here are your furlough papers, sir," she said severely. "And your ticket to Yellowstone Park."

"I approved a furlough for you, too. Where are you spending it?"

"The Everglades—as far away from Yellowstone as I can get. That was where I first realized I'd been in love with you for ages."

"You have a heart of stone."

"No, sir—standard GI issue.

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Professional soldiers can't marry each other." She paused. "Shall I call in the correspondents, Colonel?"

"No. Give me an hour's head start. I'm in no condition to be torn limb from limb. They'd find I'd left my heart behind, Holly."

She held out a paper. "My application for transfer, Colonel. Sign here."

He scrawled "DISAPPROVED" across the top, and stalked out.

She waited an hour, as ordered, then pushed the button that was supposed to let reporters in. None came. By then the harvest moon had risen and the news was releasing itself. The colonel's press release merely confirmed what all the Quixies were telling everybody. They came out from hiding and joined openly in harvest festivals, hayrides, taffy-pulls, clam-bakes, fish-fries, barbecues, barn dances, corn-roasts, and county fairs. Quixies everywhere were joining in the dancing, underneath the harvest moon, as in olden times. They were singing little songs that many of the older country-people remembered as from their childhood—irrepressible songs of a belief as ancient, as universal, as deeply rooted in the hearts of all humanity as the love of freedom, to which it is akin. A song without an end and no beginning for it has lived forever in the human heart.

WE never came from anywhere but from our Mother Earth," the Quixies sang. "For we are of the earth, the air, the water, and the fire—like you, with whom we shared the earth until your disbelief drove us into hiding, down into the secret caverns, up into the mountain crags; into trees, and down into the tunnels underneath the sea. Not being believed in made us feel so small we finally became small. But still we had to come out at night to help you in your homes and farms. You cannot till the soil without our help, for we are part of Nature, essential to you as the sun and rain. Without our busy fingers in the earth, how would seeds know when to sprout? Without us hovering in the air, how can the groping baby-fingers of the grape learn to curl about the trellis? All vines fall down and die. Without our constant supervision, chickens peck their eggs, cows hide their calves. Houses catch on fire at night when everyone's asleep, unless the little *domovoy* stands guard on the hearth to kick sparks back into the fireplace faster than the wood can spit them out."

At ten thousand harvest festivals from Ireland to the Free Ukraine, old peasants nodded sagely and said, "Of course, of course. We told you so."

Dancing in the shining rings

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and balls of fire that men have seen since time's beginnings, the Quixies sang "Who are we? Your own creations, man, born of your heart's desire for smiles and sunshine. We are your pixies and tricksies and nixies; your naiads, dryads, and hamadryads; your leprechauns and cluricaunes and erdlings; your undines, ripple-runners, and water sprites. Yes, we are vectors—carriers of the germ of laughter to your gloomy world. We are your folklore, your literature, your poetry; we are Puck, Ariel, Oberon, Titania, and good Queen Mab, the midwife, who must deliver men of their dreams, else they cannot sleep of nights.

"Call us sacred, and we are cherubim, or cupids shooting arrows into lovers' hearts. Call us profane, and we are the elemental spirits of fertility who inspire the rites of spring. Call us scientific names, and you have found the missing link, for we are miniature mutations of the human species by which man merges into Nature, and in re-emerging truly finds his own divine nature."

Around the campfires and the bonfires and the hearthfires, the lips recalled old songs no longer in the books. From sea to sea; the feet remembered dances no one had seen for a generation. There was a general remembering of precious old forgotten lore, dear to the heart of man. And as the world's remembrance of things past became the past recaptured, the Quixies gathered into glowing clouds and began to fly away, the last verses of their songs receding with them across the moonlit stubblefields.

"Who are we? Simply the Little People of the Old World who came to help the New World save the whole world for all people, large and small. We decline to accept the end of man, for that would be the end of us. We must help man to prevail, for we have a half-interest in this planet! We are your better selves, the bee in your bonnet, the bug in your ear, the little bird that's always telling people things. To put an end to the universal fear that wrung all joy from your lives, we formed an underground below the Underground, an international above all Internationales, the eternal resistance movement of the human spirit against a funless, sunless world. As our swift steeds, the running rats, desert a sinking ship, so we fled the Godless, loveless lands of slavery, fleeing through the tunnels underneath the sea, emerging through the fissures in your geologic faults. Those whom we deserted felt our leaving in the marrow of their bones, even as you felt our coming warm the cockles of your hearts. Without us, life withers at the grass-

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roots, on which all governments must stand or fall, when all is said and done. For we are the force of life itself, and if you don't behave yourselves, big folks we'll come back and lure your children down into our secret world and turn them into changelings, as we did in olden days."

With that, the wee folk vanished into groves and glens, to bogs and bosky dells, to caves and swamps, to wooded mountain slopes, and down through the tunnels underneath the sea to all the liberated lands that needed them. Tim Mahon and Colonel Clark could see a sparkling swarm of them creeping into crevices along the stony cliffs of the Devil's Dunce Cap, as the two men sat on Lookout Point and watched the sun go down.

"We set a very devil of a dunce cap on the whole cockeyed world, didn't we?" Tim chuckled. "Colonel, was it a crime to join in their conspiracy to end man's inhumanity to man?"

The colonel moodily scuffed his heel in the gravel. "Oh, I suppose not, Tim. There are no laws covering an American's dealings with aliens who are not legal entities—who are nonhuman. When a space-ship really lands—as one will, sooner or later—we may need such laws in a hurry. But for the present you are safe—the collaborators like you and Ariel Hotspur. Why did you do it?"

"With a name like Ariel, what could the poor man do? Probably pixilated at birth, by a godmother. As for meself, the answer's on me face. I want the world to be a merry place again, as old Ireland was, when the little people and big were open friends."

CLARK nodded. "Yes, at least a million people must have known what the Quixies were but felt ashamed to say the word, so badly had it fallen into disrepute."

"It's a good word yet in Ireland," Tim said proudly, "but you must say it boldly, not with a sickly simper."

"I can't say it even when I try," the colonel said. "Maybe that's why I was so obtuse in my investigation. But they made mistakes, too—scaring their friends by throwing around the worst possible choice of false clues. Spider webs—"

Tim grinned. "Could a little princess help it if we big baboons tore her dress half-off in the subway rush hour? Remember:

Elves and brownies
And their ilk
Spin shining gowns
Of spider silk.

"Maybe. But snakes—"

Tim threw back his head and laughed heartily. "Really had

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you scared for a while, didn't they? You need not have been. Little princes lose their leather britches, even as you and I. Look in Shakespeare, man:

The snake throws her enamelled skin
Weed wide enough to wrap a Fairy in.

The colonel made a face. "So someone finally said the dreaded word, out loud."

"If the Bard was not afraid of it, you needn't be. Shakespeare knew the existence of the faery kingdom was more than a midsummer-night's dream. That's what makes him the world's greatest poet—the magical power to awaken our racial memory, as Professor Muntz calls it. How is that old blatherskite now, anyway?"

"He's being psychoanalyzed—fairy trouble."

"There, you said it, too!" Tim laughed.

For the first time in his life, Clark blushed.

"Now make him say *Uncle,*" a voice behind them added. Holly Summers, in civilian clothes, was striding up the trail; and she was smiling. "Mary told me you were up here. Hello, Tim. Hello, Ken darling." She walked over to the colonel, bent down, and kissed him competently. "You're blushing," she said. "How sweet!"

"I must be attending to my duties," said Tim Mahon. "I have a lot of forest to protect, and no telling what may live inside each tree. Mind you now—no smoking." He swung off down the fire-road to the turnout where his truck was parked.

Clark looked up at Holly's candid face with a conflict of emotions. As a man, he was relieved to know that their ordeal was ended, no matter how; but as an officer, he felt a cold technical disappointment in the defection of the best sergeant he had ever had.

"So you've decided," he said. "Well, I'm glad." But he was not as glad as he had thought he was going to be. No matter how they worked it, theirs would never be a normal married life until they both reached the retirement age.

"*I* haven't decided anything," she said. "Everything has been decided for us." She took out a newspaper. "This proclamation by the President provides the only possible solution for two professional soldiers in love: Demobilization. No more professional soldiers, only an organized reserve. The Pentagon is going to be the Parliament of Man. Mr. Clark, meet Miss Summers. We are both fired!" She took out some papers, but the wind blew them away.

These two civilians may have

(*Continued on page 130*)

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TRAINING TALK

By DAVID R. BUNCH

It's always difficult for a parent to tell his children about the facts of life. Nor is it different with the facts of death.

IT was one of those days when cheer came out of a rubbery sky in great splotches and globs of half-snow and eased down the windowpanes like breakups of little glaciers. I decided it was as good a time as any to talk to them about Geryl.

Little Sister was doing cut-out angels on the floor, her thin mouth a red hyphen of do-or-die centered in the squiggly yellow parenthesis of her long raggedy hair. And Little Brother, muscled like a sweaty boxer, with his shirt off near the fire, was hammering at a train track that had got twisted. She was four. He was five.

"Little Sister," I called, "Little Brother. Could you leave off the toys long enough to discuss sense, maybe? You're both growing up, growing up. No doubt about that, no doubt about that." I had turned moody there that winter day, in the soft chair with my pipe lit and my shoes off and my feet stretched tautly toward the electric logs in the mock fireplace that glowed off-fire red. They came and stood before me, trembling slightly in the attention attitude that I insisted on out of respect for me. "Little Brother!" I snapped, "you're not dressed for a conference. Little Sister! your hair's all raggedy." He ran to put his shirt on; she ran to comb her hair.

They were back. "Kids," I said, growing reflective, "do you, either of you, have any idea what really happened to Aunt Geryl?" "She's in heaven!" Little Sister said, and her face glowed with a memory and the beautiful-story-line of the cut-outs she had been doing. "She's dead," Little Brother said forthrightly, "and either in heaven or hell. It's not my place to say. But probably hell." He'd never liked Aunt Geryl. She was always after him about his

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toys on the floor, especially the train tracks that seemed to curve everywhere. She and Little Sister had been favorites with each other.

"Where's Mother?"

"Chicago!"

"Los Angeles!"

WELL, you can stop guessing," I said. "It's Kansas City. But who cares? And that wasn't what I called you over about anyway. If it were just Mother you could go on beating your train tracks all afternoon and cut out those silly angels till supper. I wouldn't care. I'd just sit here and let this north-pole stuff slam down on the window-panes and run down to the ground and form a gray ice blanket from here to the graveyard. Which is what it's doing, in case you hadn't looked.—But I think we all liked Geryl. At any rate, she helped us out . . . at a tragic tragic time . . . when your mother—But enough of that! And anyway I think it only fair that we not go into any nonsense about what's happened and where Geryl's gone.—You kids will probably learn as you grow older that I'm a little different from some people. What I mean is, I believe in calling a thing a thing. That is, I don't believe in dressing it up. Especially about my friends. I don't think they should be lied about. People I don't like, people I don't know—all right, dress it up. Say they went to the moon, or Mars, or heaven, or hell, or star XYZ. I don't care. Why should I?"

"No reason, Pop," Little Brother said.

"You shouldn't care, Daddy," Little Sister said.

"All right! How hungry are you going to be tomorrow? And which do you like best, chicken or boloney? Tomorrow's Sunday, you know."

"CHICKEN!" they both squealed.

"All right! Go get me the boloney then, one of you, out of the cold box. I don't care which one goes. We'll keep the chicken."

Little Brother beat Little Sister in getting started for the boloney. "All right, Little Sister, instead of just standing there, you can get me the best two of your angels." She went and after a long time selected her prizes.

When they got back I told them, "All right, we're going to take a little time and do something with this sausage. We're going to carve out a Geryl for each of you, taking our time and making them as nice as we can. Oh, we'll doll them all up! with crepe paper and ribbons and bows and string, and maybe even a little hair from that real-hair doll we've been meaning to send to the hospital! We'll probably need both the butcher's knife and

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the paring knife to do the job right."

They got the knives, and I plunged into the boloney skin with the butcher's knife and mannered around in there until I had two cylinders of sausage cut out, each about six inches long and an inch or more in diameter. I proceeded to sculp them to look like Geryl as nearly as I could, long sausage nose, long dishpan-hands face, and little short shaggy-bob hair fixed on. Little Sister and Little Brother watched all the time with interest, exchanging nervous glances with each other now and again and trembling violently once in awhile. My training talks with them were always a little tense, and I could tell they lost weight at such times, but I couldn't help that. A lone parent has the whole load of the training obligation toward his children on his hands.

WHEN the Geryls were ready, as near as I could get them, I said, "All right, you know those two cigar boxes we've been saving, that I said might come in handy for a training talk. Get them. We'll line them with shiny paper." When we had the cigar boxes ready, all glinty and coffin-looking, we put the boloney figures in and the gold angels and sealed the lids down with red sealing wax. "Now we have a boloney stick, carved, and a gold angel in each box," I said. "So before the ground starts to freeze,"—the rain-snow had taken a turn toward pellety sleet by now—"You chaps just hustle right out and get this stuff under the soil."

They bundled into their winter heavies, took tiny shovels from sand pails and strode into the sling-shot sleet. I watched from the window and saw Little Brother do his burial quickly by a young plum tree. Little Sister, taking more time, did hers in the open and marked it with a stone white with ice.

Little Brother waited patiently for her to finish.

When they came in stamping and wheezing and all fired up with the cold, I told them simply, from my usual iceberg distance of dignity, "You may each go back to your own kettle tendings and pot watchings now—whatever you were doing before, I mean. In about six months we'll try to get together on this thing again, dig into these burials and finish up this training talk about Aunt Geryl. We'll reach a conclusion about what really happened to her, where she's gone, the efficacy of heaven and hell, the Promise and all that. Or we'll certainly try to."

Little Sister went listlessly back to her angels, and Little Brother seemed old—old, going for his train tracks . . .

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WHEN six months had gone by on the boloney sticks and the angels and it was May, green May, we went to open the caskets. "WHERE'S MOTHER?" I yelled to the children suddenly and without warning as we strolled above the green grave sites of our serious grim keen experiments before we started to dig. "New Orleans!" Little Sister cried, and Little Brother guessed, "Boston!" "WHO CARES?" I raved back. "It's neither of those hell places, and I wouldn't have asked you, except I glanced and saw a black heavy heart up there on those two tiny limbs in that elm tree, and I spoke without volition. And never mind that big word volition. Just say that I spoke without meaning to. Just say that the spring sometimes bemuses one until he is unguardful; all brainwashed to giddiness and standing caught with his words down—he knows not—

"LET'S DIG!" We fell to delving then where Little Sister had buried her Geryl and, after about five seconds of spading fast and tossing, my spade all at once fell on a hollow thuddy noise. I sprang forward to claw with my hands, and soon I lifted the box forth. Then I dropped it.

There was a rattling sound! There was a slithery and slathery sound, there was a rasping, like rope being pulled through crushed paper. The box lived! It lived?? Out of one carved boloney stick and a little girl's gold angel something had hatched!! Something had hatched??? WHAT had hatched!!!?

For a moment I stood in awe while sunlight flooded the falsely pleasant world of May and that queer dry sound of slithering continued in the cigar box that was our training-talk casket. Then, recovering my sure knowledge of the world and casting awe to the ground, I cautiously shattered the wax that sealed our casket lid shut and, using the spade for my safety, I pried open the box.

"Kill it, Father, kill it! Don't let it get away!" Little Brother shrieked, and he jigged, and he held his nose from the sausage that was now well over six months of age.

"My cut-out! He's done a nest in my cut-out!" Little Sister cried and jumped, and then she clutched her nose and her chest and went still and white-faced as cathedral statuary.

But I stood brave with heavy hands, as stones, while we looked at each other, measured each other steadily. It had two sharp cold eyes in a head shaped like the forthwith end of a spear. It hoisted a calm slick-stick part of itself upon three circles of chill, and it weaved the spearhead there in the sunny air of May, a wedge that I could not stop re-

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garding. Then noiselessly it left, not even rattling the angel, deftly unslung from its orbs and, feeding the straightening circles over the side of the box, slipped itself to the ground.

WE'LL all come back tomorrow!" I yelled. "This is all for today!" I cried. "We'll try to draw some conclusions. Later. We'll dig—we'll spade—we'll bring up Little Brother's casket! We'll assess." And suddenly, my legs going to jelly-mush and water, I sat hurriedly down to the freshly-dug ground. I hand-waved the children from me, told them to go do some kind of games, while I watched a thing that I thought was going deeper into the safety and gloom of the cold and dark-turned soil. Then quite unexpectedly at the edge of an especially large clod I had turned in the early digging it brought up its head, and it looked at me for a cold instant from its camouflage, almost the color of wet soil. Then, breaking for open ground, it glided into the emerald grass of May and completely disappeared from my straining eyes, leaving me to my fears and my fresh confusions. But it was scared! I clung to that thought. It knew it had met a master.

Idly, weakly, I reached for the training-talk casket, my thoughts struck numb with wonderment. I had problems. Yes, real problems now. What miracle What dark miracle? How into the box, the carefully sealed box? What's to know? And what's ever to know after this? And then my eyes fell upon it. Oh, the saving of all the cold judgments. What joy! At a corner of the box there was a place of warping—the glue had given way, the short nails had been bested—caused, no doubt, by dampness in the soil. A hole gaped there, quite small, but big! big as the world . . .

But my joy was short-lived and my extreme relief cut down to its death almost before its real borning. In my mind that night, thinking and thinking, I knew, yes, KNEW! that such a snake, if it was a snake—such a creature —had never been seen in that part of the country before. I could hardly wait for next day. YES! What strange sign might we not find to help us in the very next training-talk casket . . .

THE END

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By RICK RAPHAEL

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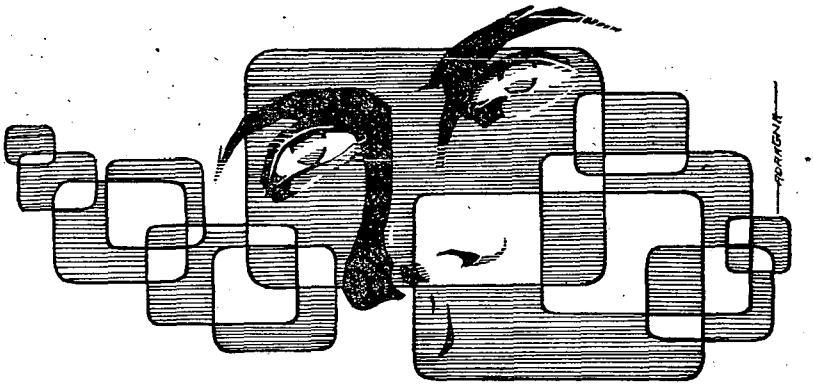

A team of Vegan doctors and an American craze for early Western TV movies were the two dominant factors in getting Earth's first living interstellar traveler back to tell his story.

FOR a long time it didn't look as though we'd ever get anyone out of our own little Solar System. By the time I graduated from the U.S. Space Academy at White Sands, there were so many vehicles in outer space that the U.N. was talking about setting up a traffic control system.

Just look at the sky. Weather satellites, research satellites, military control satellites, and now, about fourteen jillion television relay satellites. When you boil it down, most of that hardware out there isn't going anywhere except around and around this little green globe.

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Oh, sure, we've got that regular run to the Moon and the shuttle runs to Space Stations One and Two where the lunar launches start. And there's a bi-weekly drop to the mines on Mars and the fungus factories on Venus. But they're no problem. It's all those damned satellites. Especially the TV relays.

But you've got to admit that they sure do improve reception. That is, if you think it's any improvement to see with more clarity, new releases of old "Gunsmoke" or "Have Gun, Will Travel" westerns made back in the late Fifties and early Sixties.

But I shouldn't complain. Like I said, if it weren't for those old kinescopes, I wouldn't be here today.

The year I came out of the Academy—back in '09—was the same year that Jim Westbrook hit on the method of beefing up the ion drive to plus light speeds. But it took seven more years of trial, errors, troubles and headaches before they finally got it under control and another four years to harness it to an engine that would drive a space vehicle. That's when we were ready for interstellar travel. They tried it out on two or three drones and it appeared to work like a charm. At least the drones went out so damned far that they couldn't track 'em and that's out of our system. And they came back.

But they knew, as is always the case, the proof of success had to be made by a man. That's where I entered the scene.

BY the time they were ready to think about a manned vehicle I was a seasoned spaceman. A year on an intermediate weather satellite, then 18 months on the Station shuttles as pilot and I graduated to Lunar run as third officer. I was making my 58th trip when a meteorite hulled us right through the front office. It decapitated the skipper, burned a four-inch hole from front to back through the exec's chest and took an arm off the second officer. I was just lucky. I was sitting back at plot, still suited-up from an outside hull inspection and just getting ready to shuck out of my gear when the rock came through the living room window.

I slammed my helmet back in place, sounded General Quarters and managed to get the emergency board in action. Since we were too close to the Moon to waste time on trying to seal the holes, I kept the cabin sealed off from the rest of the pressurized main hull and brought us in on manuals. That got me another stripe and a command of my own, all of which led to my being in the final five selected for the interstellar shot. But that was nearly six years later.

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Remember reading in your history books how they picked seven guys back in the late Fifties for the first outer space manned shot? And how one of them finally was selected by lottery to man that clumsy Atlas? That's all he did—man it. There wasn't anything he could do but sit there and get slammed out into space and then fall back like a rock.

This was history all over again and the five of us went through another intensive training period, learning every detail of the Westbrook drive and boning up on theoretical stellar navigation.

It had to be theoretical. No one had ever been out there to map it. But solar nav was a good kindergarten.

The boys with the brains finally decided on Vega as our initial effort goal. The pilot would have to make his own decision on landing and pick a likely planet when he got close enough to make an analysis. That's what almost killed me.

THE last four months of preparation were spent on Space Station Two with the hull of the "Starlight"—that's what they christened the first Westbrook ship—floating in the launching dock.

Four months on that plumber's nightmare gets awfully monotonous, despite the work we were doing on the ship and our other training. And we still did not know which of us would be the final choice for pilot. We wouldn't know until 48 hours before the jump. So we worked, waited—and watched Westerns.

Out there, 21,000 miles from Earth, we were only 5,000 miles or so from NTC's mammoth television relay satellite, the biggest and newest of all of them in orbit. The reception was magnificent since we were orbiting at about the same speed as the TV relay. The biggest and hottest transmitters ever built had been installed in that frame and by the time I was tagged to make the jump I could tell you how many pores James Arness had in his face and how many hairs in Richard Boone's moustache. Man, did we pick up those Westerns.

And you know something weird? So did the Vegans!

I didn't find that out until several weeks after I made the big jump.

By the time the wheels were ready to name the pilot there were five nervous wrecks on Space Two. They made the announcement at evening mess on May 13. When my name was called there was a roar from everyone on the Station and guys started pounding me on the back and shaking my hand until I thought I'd be walloped apart before I got aboard "Starlight."

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The next morning the final countdown was begun that would end 48 hours later in blastoff. And that's when I really began to work. I'll never forget how wonderful the other four pilot candidates were—each one of them heartsick with disappointment but never letting it show in front of me for a second as they worked like slaves to help me through a million and one last inspections and checks.

At 6 a.m., Greenwich, May 14, the "Starlight" and I drifted clear of the station docks and at 6:02 I cut in .001 per cent power. The station, Earth and the Moon began to dwindle and when I was clear at 6:37, Station beam control gave me the green board for max power. I kicked the relays and a split second later was out of the solar system heading Vegasward.

I suppose this should have been a dramatic and possibly frightening moment. Truth of the matter is that I was too damned busy to do more than glance at the video screen and catch a view of the blurred streaks of light representing Jupiter and Uranus. There was no sensation of speed, no thrust, no gravity. Just the same old weightlessness of regular planetary travel.

But there was one hell of a lot of work to do, keeping tabs on the drive system, starfix plots, radiation counters and a score of other tasks.

The programming called for me to hit the Vegan system in four days, reduce speed and cruise, looking for a possible planet to make a landing. If I found one, I was to set "Starlight" down, make a limited inspection if it appeared safe and all analytical instruments gave me the okay. Then, with any mineral or biological specimens possible, I was to jump off for home, arriving back at Space Two by May 24th at the earliest or May 28th, at the latest.

As it was, I didn't see Earth again for seven months. And when I did get back, no one knew where I'd been—or who I was.

"Starlight," prodded to unbelievable speeds by the silent shove of the Westbrook drive, put me into observation distance of the Vegan system 94 hours after blastoff. I reduced speed to one half drive but I was still closing like a meteor. I punched for quarter speed and things slowed down to the point that I could start scanning the nearest planets.

That didn't take long.

THE spectro-beam plotted Vega V as an oxygen atmosphere and I corrected course for a better look and punched for one-tenth Westbrook as I noticed the

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still too-high closing rate. Depending on the gravitational mass of the planet I would choose, I had made a rough guess that I could make planetfall in a free drop and then cushion down at between .01 and .001 power. But right now I was still coming too hot and still not sure that Vega V was worth landing on.

Vega V was beginning to fill up the video screen now and I could see cloud formations covering much of its mass with glimpses of green and blue showing through the patches.

I punched for .01 power and that's when the landing was decided for me. The Westbrook quit.

The board read 40,000 miles from mass, closing at 2,000 miles per minute. I fired three solid-fuel nose-braking rockets. The Doppler showed closing speed down to 1,000 miles a minute. I fired three more and it was cut in half again. Five minutes later, the skin temperature lights began glowing and "Starlight" began to yaw as we plunged into the atmosphere of Vega V. As we dug deeper into the air mass, I began to see the conformations of land masses beneath the clouds of the planet. The atmosphere was slowing "Starlight" down but hull temperature was rising near the sloughing point and the refrigeration system was wide open. Speed was down to 300 miles per minute when I fired three more rockets and this time I felt the kick-back as the thrust slammed into the atmosphere.

And speed dropped hard to less than 500 miles an hour. At 120 miles from touchdown I fired the last three rockets and that was all she wrote. Our speed fell to 400 miles an hour, wobbled down to 300 and I dove for the crash pad.

At better than 100 miles an hour, "Starlight" and I made man's first contact with a stellar-distance body. I think I vaguely recall that instant of impact and then—nothing!

WHEN I regained consciousness, I was sorry that I had. My mind was awake but I was blind and paralyzed. No pain, you understand, no sensation of any kind. Just a mind suspended in nothingness. Nothingness that was broken by a voice. Or at least I think it was a voice. I heard it in my mind.

"You are awake, Earthling?"

Did you ever try to talk without a mouth? The words form in your mind and then slide down your nervous system to emerge as sound in your throat. The words were forming in my mind and then chasing themselves around my medulla trying to find a way out.

"Don't strain, Earthling, we

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understand you. We read you loud and clear."

I relaxed mentally and the voice in my mind continued.

"You have been gravely hurt but you soon will be whole. Our knowledge will make you whole again."

Understand now, that these weren't exactly words, just sort of ideas I was getting from them. It was quite a while before I caught on to the fact that the Vegans were telepaths and were reading my mind and talking to me the same way. They didn't use actual phrases, but their ideas sound like they had come from me. In a way, they did, since they had to use my thought processes and speech mannerisms, even mental, to learn my identity. They even knew my name, Major Paul Calkins.

"How bad am I hurt?"

Beyond recognition, came the mental reply.

"How can you help me?"

We are synthesizing your body.

"How do you know how I look? Are you human as well?"

That's when I found out about the television beaming.

Shortly after NTC lofted its huge relay station, broken bits of the telecasts began bombarding the Vegan system. The Vegans, who by their own descriptions are remotely rodent-like in appearance, soon began backtracking the beams through space. I say they are rodent-like by their own description. I never saw them. They never allowed me to regain my sight while still on the planet.

TRANSMISSIONS from Earth were broken, both by spatial magnetic currents and by the rotation of the NTC relay satellite around Earth and Earth's own rotation around the sun. But occasionally, reasonably lengthy periods of reception were recorded. Enough for the Vegans to identify the source and even make guesses at culture. But only from the picture. The sound waves never came through on frequency.

But given an image and with the bio-chemical smears they analyzed from the mess that must have been my body, they could synthesize.

I had crashed close to a Vegan city and rescue teams were hauling my smashed body from the wreckage within minutes. Being telepaths they quickly recognized that the brain is the seat of life and mine had been removed from the shattered and crushed pulp of my skull and still reasonably intact. It was the only thing recognizable as an organ. Now my brain—and I—lay in a nutrient bath, waiting for a new body to be synthesized.

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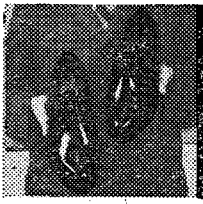

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How do you keep track of time when you're disembodied? I don't know. How long I was kept in the tank is problematical. It seems in retrospect to have been but minutes before they cautioned me that an anesthetic was being added to the nutrient solution which would blank out my mind.

When you awake you will be aboard one of our ships, returning to your Earth. You will not be able to move until you have arrived. We are an ancient people and we do not wish to cope with your race. While we wish your people no harm, we have nothing in common nor have we anything to share. When you get back, tell this to your people so that they will not again attempt contact.

Then nothingness once again!

When I came to, it was to the sound of shouting human voices echoing through the metal ramparts of the huge automated Vegan ship that now rested in the dock at Space Station Two.

I can't blame the Vegans for what happened. How were they to know that the big species that stood quietly and dignifiedly aside while the smaller ones were obviously slaughtering each other, weren't the dominant species.

It must have been quite a shock to the boys on Space Two when they had to lead a horse off that Vegan ship. **THE END**

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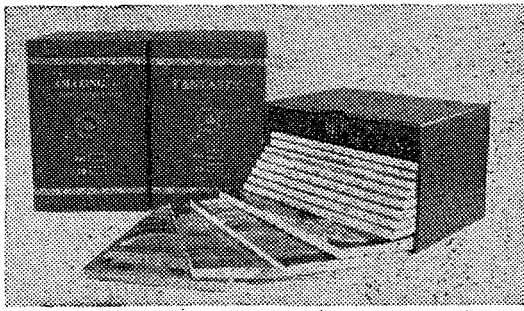

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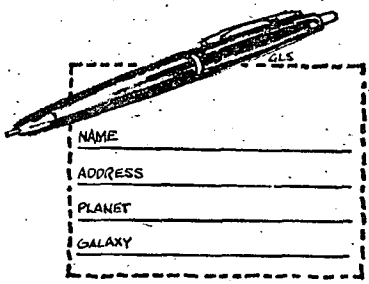

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(*Continued from page 113*)

thought they were alone. But no one ever is, entirely. A pointed face no bigger than your thumb, with sparkling eyes about the size of 20-carat diamonds, looked out mischievously from underneath a rock, liked what it saw, and laughed. It was a tiny sound, no louder than one jingle bell a long way off. Yet it had the superior power of an older secret than the atom bomb, and greater heat; for it had thawed out the frozen asset of the human race without which all were poor: The divine ability to forgive and forget and to live by love, to the music of love's echo, laughter.

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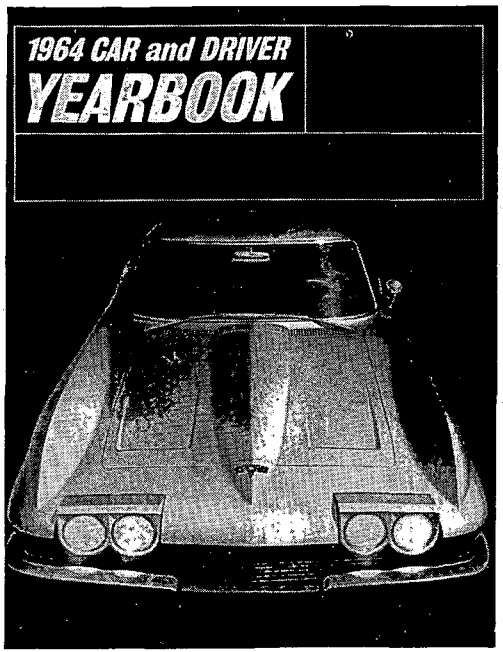

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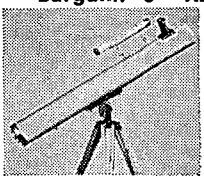

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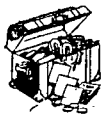

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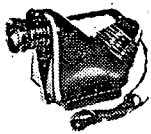

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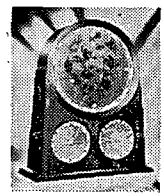

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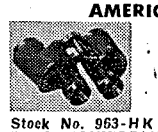

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